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Queen Bea

A Novel

**No Me Without You: How concepts of self as mutable and multiple
shaped the YA novel *Queen Bea*.**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Bath Spa
University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
School of Humanities and Cultural Industries, Bath Spa University

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Abstract

This dissertation comprises a young adult novel and contextualising thesis. The novel *Queen Bea* explores concepts of multiple self and narcissism as normative states for adolescents. The contextualising thesis is an intensely personal piece. It charts not only the transformation of the novel following research into the concept of mutable and multiple self, but also the author's own metamorphoses from childhood, through adulthood, into her own acceptance of multiple selves, and the implications for her writing. It comprises an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion. The introduction sets out the scope, methodology and limitations, as well as offering an insight into Nadin's interest in 'self'. In the opening chapter she discusses the background to *Queen Bea*, including the teenage transformations that have characterised her work, contextualising the work within the YA tradition of 'quest for self' novels. In Chapter 2 she looks at the influence the concepts of a 'mutable and multiple' self and 'necessary narcissism' had on her thinking and on the structure and content of the novel, in particular referencing Julian Baggini, Bruce Hood, Erik Erikson and Elizabeth Lunbeck. Chapter 3 attempts to situate her work within the context of other YA literature that has explored mutable or multiple self, including David Levithan's novel *Every Day*. Chapter 4 looks in greater detail at some of the ways in which she has tried to weave her thoughts on self and self-obsession into plot, form and characterisation in the final draft of *Queen Bea*. She concludes by discussing whether or not she believes *Queen Bea* achieves what she set out to achieve, and what the implications are going forward. This is followed by appendices and a bibliography.

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Queen Bea (a novel)

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No me without you: How concepts of self as mutable and multiple shaped the YA novel *Queen Be*

Introduction

Scope, methodology and limitations

Chapter 1 of this thesis traces my own long-standing obsession with metamorphosis, and describes the teenage transformations that have characterised my work, contextualising them within the YA tradition of ‘quest for self’ novels. It sets out the plot of and thinking behind the original version of *Queen Bea*, and the two elements that precipitated my feeling that the story needed a change of both plot and purpose:

- a) My growing unease with the idea of the metamorphosed as an ‘imposter’, focusing on my readings of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1950), and Gordon Korman’s YA retelling of the story *Jake, Reinvented* (Korman, 2005).
- b) My self-identification as a narcissist as defined by psychology professor Jean M. Twenge and scientist Susan Greenfield, and Twenge’s accusation that YA literature is partly to blame for what she terms a ‘narcissism epidemic’ (Twenge, 2009).

Chapter 2 describes the meeting with the novelist Emily Mackie that set me on a new path both academically and creatively: to investigate her suggestion that self as a fixed entity is mere illusion. It goes on to look at the influence the concepts of an ‘illusory’ self and a ‘mutable and multiple’ self had on my thinking and on the structure and content of the novel, allowing me to abandon my, and my protagonist’s, search for a single ‘true’ self. Finally it explores how the work of psychoanalyst Erik Erikson on identity formation

and crisis in teenagers, and of academic Elizabeth Lunbeck on narcissism gave me the courage to shift the emphasis on self-obsession in *Queen Bea* from the narrow lens of a personality disorder afflicting a single character, to a both universal and desirable trait.

Chapter 3 attempts to situate my work within the context of other YA literature that has articulated a mutable or multiple self. In particular, it explores American author David Levithan's work *Every Day* (2012).¹

Chapter 4 unpacks *Queen Bea* itself, looking in greater detail at some of the ways in which I have tried to weave my thoughts on self and self-obsession into plot, form and characterisation.

Finally, I discuss whether or not I believe *Queen Bea* achieves what I set out to achieve, and what the implications are for future research and creative work.

The thesis does not attempt to explain or expand on general theories of self or narcissism; these are vast and vastly contested concepts and such a task is beyond the scope of this work. Nor does it attempt to directly disprove Greenfield or Twenge; again, this is beyond the limits of this thesis. Instead it aims to show how I explored and articulated alternative theories on self and narcissism in novel form.

¹ Since writing, it has been brought to my attention that none of the novels I reflect upon have female protagonists (or authors), whereas my own work, and the films I looked at during research, do. This was not a deliberate omission, nor subconscious sexism at work, but rather that my original intent for my novel had been to update *The Great Gatsby*, with a focus on F. Scott Fitzgerald's character Daisy Buchanan as a new protagonist and subject of the thesis. *Jake Reinvented* was discovered during this research, and, as a direct modernisation, follows the gender casting of the original novel. Furthermore, David Levithan's protagonist in *Every Day* is of non-specified gender, altering with each "host" they inhabit.

This thesis does not reflect or dissect a series of drafts that changed as my research progressed. My writing process is such that I spend the majority of my creative time in the planning stage: working and reworking plot, structure, voice and character until they are almost fully formed. I then write a single draft, which is subsequently edited only for nuance of language (although more detailed edits may ensue at the behest of editors). Chapters 1 to 3 relate to the planning stage of my work; Chapter 4 and the conclusion to this first and final draft.

It should also be noted that I deliberately use an informal, exploratory voice. The creative and research processes were journeys of self-discovery, in every sense, and as such this is a personal piece, written in first person, and includes the questions I asked myself along the way as well as autobiographical passages.

Background

It is summer 1978, the evening air still redolent with overheated tarmac, the beaker of water next to my bed tainted by a residue of orange squash and plastic. Downstairs the grown-ups are discussing Mr Callaghan and a woman called Margaret Thatcher, whom my father seems to favour. But up here, rigid under a psychedelic duvet cover, the eight-year-old me has more important matters to mind. She has just, in what will be her first epiphanic moment, realised the sheer incredibility of her existence – a tangible, singular being. There can't be that many people in the world, she thinks. A thousand, maybe; two at most. So the very fact she is on earth at all seems almost impossible to

comprehend. But, what is troubling her is not how she *came to be*, but what she will *come to be*. For, if there are so few people alive at all, the self she is had better be a good one. But what is her ‘self’?

She knows what her mother thinks it is.

‘There are pretty girls, and there are clever girls, Joanna. You are a clever girl.’

Being clever is important, she thinks. But she would like to be pretty too. And more. For surely, pretty and clever are not the only options open to her. So she would like to be funny, sassy, ingenious. More specifically, she would like to be a goatherd in a hayloft like *Heidi*. And also in a crime-solving gang like George in the *Famous Five*. Or win the Grand National disguised as a boy like Velvet Brown. Why should who she is amount to her ability in maths and spelling?

And so begins my journey to find a better self. First I try out the girls from books for size. Then, when I have outgrown the pages of Blyton, I look around me and pick models from the ranks hanging around outside the sixth form common room – a New Romantic, a Goth, a psychobilly. I imagine myself on the silver screen: Andy in *Pretty in Pink* – the girl literally from the wrong side of the tracks, winning the heart of the rich kid with her kooky dress sense and love of vinyl; Baby in *Dirty Dancing* who gets to save the world, as well as dance the Cha Cha Cha with Patrick Swayze. Later, I change career with determination and frequency: actress, circus trainee, radio newsreader, political adviser. All these are guises I try out for size, all the while terrified that what I fear is my ‘true’ self – the smart but plain one my mother has painted me as – will out. But still, this does not stop me, because,

helpless, I march to the mantra in my head that beats out the question ‘Who am I?’

This, then is a search for ‘self’. For the purposes of this thesis, self and identity are used interchangeably, to denote a sense of me-ness. This includes both the characteristics of an individual, and that individual’s consciousness that these are distinct, and used to distinguish them from others – a tacit acknowledgement of the self as both ‘I’ and ‘you’, or ‘she’. (Conflating the online Collins definition of self as ‘an individual’s consciousness of his own identity or being’ (<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/self>) and its definition of ‘identity’ as ‘the individual characteristics by which a person or thing is recognized’ (<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/identity>).)

The search for this self defines both my teen and adult life. I have come to realise through the process of working on this PhD that it is also behind my compulsion to write, enabling me to inhabit the identity of my characters for a few months at a time, to live other lives, to ‘be someone else’. It drives the plots of all my work for teenagers: the seven semi-autobiographical *Rachel Riley Diaries* (2013a-f; 2014a), the standalone *Buttercup Mash* (2011), and, more explicitly, the three young adult² (YA) novels *Wonderland* (2014d), *Undertow* (originally published as *Paradise*; 2014c) and *Eden* (2014b).

² For the purposes of this thesis, I define ‘YA’ as books both written for and published for mid- to late-adolescents (teenagers of 13+). For a more detailed analysis of the fluctuating nature of the term and its relationship to the fluctuating nature of adolescence itself, please see Wheatley (1990).

The latter three all focus on late-adolescent girls' search for self both within and against family and peers, with both *Wonderland* and *Eden* including a metamorphosis scene (here a physical transformation through the use of make-up, clothes and hair dye) at the midpoint. All three also portray psychopathological conditions that affect identity: the plot of *Wonderland* hinges on Dissociative Identity Disorder (what used to be termed Multiple Personality Disorder); *Undertow* explores depression and Alzheimer's disease; while the last, *Eden*, completed a few months before I began the PhD programme, depicts both bipolar disease and some elements of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), a condition with which I was beginning to become fascinated.

Queen Bea, submitted alongside this thesis, began life in much the same form. Intended as a high school Pygmalion story, this new novel would have NPD at its heart. It would set out what I saw then as the considerable appeal of these extreme narcissists – charming, charismatic, but damningly self-obsessed creatures. (At this point, it should be said that my definition of 'narcissism' aligned with the Collins online dictionary as 'an exceptional interest in or admiration for oneself, esp one's physical appearance', listing as its first synonyms 'egotism, vanity, conceit', as well as 'self-absorption' and 'self-obsession'.

(<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/narcissism>). The research detailed in Chapter 2 moves me more towards a more positive analysis, interchanging it with the slightly less loaded 'self-interest'.) It would also make clear that their charisma was a manifestation not of their confidence, but of their lack of it; a symptom of their need for constant

validation. And it would conclude that, while the ride might be exhilarating, ultimately it was a destructive one for all those on board.

That was the plan and it was, I thought, a simple one. But early on in the research process a series of discoveries derailed not only the plot of *Queen Bea*, but also my very beliefs about self and self-obsession, and how they are and could be portrayed in young adult literature. This thesis, then, charts not only the stages of *Queen Bea*'s own metamorphosis, from genesis to exegesis, but also my own personal transformations, both in the way I see my selves, and in the stories I want to tell.

As such, it is part logbook, part retrospective. It aims to show how my thinking as a writer was transformed in the early stages of research, and how this affected the subsequent novel, turning it from a 'quest for self' story into one about a quest for 'selves'. It also aims to show why this matters, firstly, and above all, to my readers, whom I hope will gain a better understanding of the role friends, fiction and media play in forming our identity, feel more free to revel in the playing out of different selves, whilst feeling less pressure to pick a single self on which to base their adulthood. Secondly, I intend the novel to be a voice to stand against Twenge and her damning analysis of contemporary YA, showing that adolescent novels can be constructive, rather than destructive, helping teenagers form positive identities; showing that the internet is far from a teenage wasteland; and showing that the kids really are alright.

1. The novel's early form, and the first indications of metamorphosis

The story of *Queen Bea* comes back to that mantra I heard and still hear:

‘Who am I?’ For YA novelist and academic Julia Green, the ‘big questions’ that drive adolescence are: ‘Who am I? What am I doing? Who do I love? How do I deal with change, or recover from loss? How shall I live now?’ (Green, 2014: 106-7) For me, the latter four can all be subsumed under that initial query, one that pervades the literature written for and about that age group.

YA is a relatively young publishing phenomenon,³ a child of the 1960s that has only recently matured to become a successful bookshop section in its own right. However, a tradition of literature taking adolescence as its subject was established centuries earlier. The academic Roberta Seelinger Trites traces YA’s roots to the romantic era and the emergence in Germany of *Entwicklungsromane* and *Bildungsromane*. These are both groups of novels concerning the ‘maturation process’ (Trites, 2000: 9), but the second category includes within its narrative the coming of age of the protagonist, as he (and it usually was a he) took on adult responsibilities and an adult identity. But these were and remain novels for grown-ups, offering an often nostalgic view of an age their readers have long passed through – a tone still apparent in books such as Kevin Maher’s *The Fields* (2014), David Mitchell’s *Black Swan*

³ While some literary historians point to the 1942 publication of Margaret Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer* as the first novel written specifically for adolescents (rather than merely attracting an adolescent audience), it is not until the late 1960s, when the US library system introduced a new categorization, that we witness the birth of ‘young adults’. A term arising from literature, rather than being forced upon it, these were the intended readers of books like Beverly Cleary’s *Fifteen* and S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*: books written for and about (and in Hinton’s case by) teenagers.

Green 2007), and Nina Stibbe's *Man at the Helm* (2015). Examples of this retrospective form do exist in young adult literature, including my own *Eden*, but they are the exception. YA, while retaining that 'quest for self' story, has a younger audience, a more 'in the now' narrative, and a more pressing purpose.

Adolescence is an 'in-between' age; you are defined neither as child nor adult, but you often are experiencing that 'grown-up' world for the first time. As such it can appear both vertiginous and desolate. For me, YA literature, at its best, takes its readers by the hand and shows them a possible path through this hinterland, from what Holden Caulfield famously dreams as the 'fields of rye' of childhood over the cliff-face into the unknown landscape of adulthood (Salinger, 1958). The key question for me as a writer of YA fiction has always been: who will I be when I make that leap? This question is played out in the way we take on new forms. Sometimes that can be gradual – a slow slipping in to a new group, a new pair of shoes, a haircut; a taking up of sport, or a dropping of 'h's. Sometimes it can be instant and dramatic, an overnight switch, and it is this kind that has long fascinated me.

Encouraged by a tattered Ladybird retelling of Cinderella, my childhood obsession with the possibility of metamorphosis was initially played out through the dressing-up box. Clothed in leftover hessian from one of my mother's many craft projects, I would quickly don a fur stole and crown when my fairy godmother – a conscripted little brother – transformed me into the princess I longed to be. When hormones set in and I acquired a stereo, my gaze turned to musical chameleons Bolan and Bowie. I wanted them and I wanted to be them – to have that confidence to cast-off suburban or working-

class (or, worse, middle-class) childhoods through clothes, make-up and a change of name. At the age of seventeen I fell for Frank ‘N’ Furter, and *The Rocky Horror Show*’s exhortation ‘don’t dream it, be it’, escaping smalltown Essex for Friday nights at the Prince Charles off Leicester Square, along with millions of other wannabes and wish-they-weres dressed up for the singalong version of the film.

Makeover television offered up more fodder. As an eleven-year-old I had longed to sit on the hot pleather banquette in the window of Hair By Us and watch the Essex girls being permed, bobbed and blow-dried. I daren’t ask my mother to be allowed this treat for fear of sounding ‘weird’ or ‘lesbian’ – as a girl in the early 1980s, the worst insults I imagined could have been hurled at me. But in my twenties I found myself free to watch such transformations at leisure, and in private. Shows like *Ten Years Younger*, *What Not To Wear* and *The Swan* depicted ugly ducklings being transformed, all building up to that ‘mirror moment’ when their new look would be revealed and they (and we) would gasp in delight. These were the stories I sought out ‘in real life’, and they were the ones I favoured in fiction too, from that well-thumbed ‘Well-Loved Tale’ to books like Meg Cabot’s *The Princess Diaries* (2001) and eventually Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (2004), the collection that includes Narcissus’s transmogrification from man to flower, a myth studied as part of this thesis.

Holly Smale’s *Geek Girl*, an international YA bestseller, articulates the enduring appeal of these tales of transformation: the possibility of casting off your current form and becoming someone ‘better’.

This could be my metamorphosis story, like Ovid's or Kafka's, or Hans Christian Andersen's *The Ugly Duckling* or even *Cinderella* (originally called *Rhodopis* and written in Greece in 1 BC). I could go from proverbial caterpillar to butterfly; from tadpole to frog. From larva to dragonfly (which is actually only a half metamorphosis, but still – I think – worth mentioning). MODELLING COULD TRANSFORM ME. And I'd no longer be Harriet Manners – hated, ignored, humiliated. I'd be... someone else. Someone different. Someone cool. (Smale, 2013: 109-110)

It is this desire, almost desperation, that drives my own fictional incarnation Rachel Riley to continual (and confounded) effort to transform herself across five years and seven novels. Like Harriet, Rachel's goal is not to be considered beautiful, but interesting:

Why is life never like it is in books? Nothing Jacqueline Wilson ever happens to me: I am not adopted, my mum is not tattooed, I am not likely to move to the middle of a council estate or be put into care. My parents are not alcoholics, drugs addicts, or closet transvestites. No one in my family is brown, gay, interestingly autistic or even mildly special needs (although James won't eat fruit and meat on the same plate and can sing the books of the Bible off by heart). Even my name is pants. Why didn't my parents call me something exotic like Lola? (Actually I asked Mum once and she said no daughter of hers was being named after a transsexual prostitute.) In other words, my life is earth-shatteringly NORMAL.

This cannot go on. Something deep and meaningful has to happen. (Nadin, 2013a: 11-12)

Rachel's failure to undergo this transformation either physically (an effort to restyle herself ends with a haircut that she is told resembles a 'young Myra Hindley'), in name (attempts to persuade her peers to start calling her 'Ray' are rebuffed) or in experience – at least in her own overinflated terms of tragedy – echoes my own; fictionalising it becoming a kind of cure,

cushioning my disappointment by couching it in comedy. In my young adult thrillers, the changes are more successful, and of the mirror moment variety.

In *Wonderland*, Jude, traumatised by the death of her mother, conjures up Stella as a glamorous alter. It is Stella who ‘performs’ the initial makeover, complete with vintage prom dress, cigarette and vodka-tonic. This metamorphosis is repeated with another mirror scene when the girls bleach Jude’s hair to match Stella’s: ‘Five hours later and I’m staring at the not-me in the mirror. I am different. Four packets of Clairol Ash Blonde different, heavy black eyeliner and lipstick different. Not obscure anymore, but stand-out, look-at-me bright.’ (Nadin, 2014d: 112) This is followed by a third metamorphosis when Jude raids the attic for a Dior gown, becoming her dead mother’s double.

In *Eden*, metamorphosis is the grail not just for protagonist Evie, but for all three antagonists: Evie, a self-declared ‘nobody’ wants to be her more daring cousin Bea: ‘I am the not-Bea,’ she declares, ‘the wanna-Bea.’ (2014b: 101); Bea, an aspiring actress, wants to be everybody – ‘all things at once’ (2014b: 80); working-class Wiganer James wants to be (and masquerades as) Hampshire MP’s son Penn; and Penn, another actor, wants to be a nobody, to disappear into his roles in order to escape the constraints of privilege. Evie’s transformation scene sees her dressing up in one of her grandmother’s ballgowns to turn herself into a version of Bea, finally coming out of the shadows and seducing James-as-Penn in the process:

I stand in front of the mirror, take in the girl I have become: the lips painted a heavy, sticky red; the eyes ringed with black kohl; the hair pinned up on my head in a disheveled bun. And the dress: a 1950s emerald shot taffeta, like the hard, shiny carapace of a beetle,

glimmering with blues and yellows as I move, its skirts rustling in anticipation. (Nadin, 2014b:178)

But the transformations are temporary. Exhorted by peers, parents, lovers, to be their ‘true’ selves (the invariably duller ones they started out as), both Jude and Evie are eventually forced to accept their genetic heritage and the opinions of others and slough off the new costumes, however well-fitting, returning to a form more akin to their ‘larval’ stage. Why? Because, however hard I wanted to believe in it, I knew from bitter experience that the masquerade would be unveiled.

It is 1984 and I am going to my first village disco. It is an auspicious occasion, one heralded by furtive whispers in class and a slew of phone calls in which my friend Ruth and I ascertain which boys will be there, and which might deign to kiss us. But if I am going to be kissed I need to look the part, and that means make-up, and fashioning myself something more daring to wear than hand-me-down jeans and a sweatshirt. A kilt rolled up into a miniskirt, a school shirt with the sleeves cut off and new buttons sewn on, a slick of Twilight Teaser on my lips, I tread down the wooden stairs of our 1970s estate home with all the fear and anticipation of Cinderella awaiting judgment from the wicked stepmother. My own actual mother, while not exactly wicked, is a harsh critic.

‘What on earth do you think you look like?’

I stutter out an ‘I don’t know’ to be met with a laugh and what amounts, to me, to eternal damnation.

‘You look absurd. You’re not that sort of girl. You don’t look like you.’

And the scene ends, as it always does, with my ‘wiping that stuff off and putting something more sensible on’.

I didn’t want to believe it. But if my mother said it, then surely it had to be true: these clothes weren’t ‘me’. Make-up was just covering up ‘truth’. It was nothing more than Carroll’s Duchess putting clothes on a pig and pretending it was a baby. The lesson was clear: I should learn to accept who I am.

And so that is what all my YA books have taught: a form of self-acceptance. *Queen Bea* would become the first to break this mould, but not in its initial form.

The Book of Bad

For as long as Bea can remember, she and Caitlin have been best friends, and, for as long as she can remember, they have been at the bottom of the social ladder at Pennington High, enduring at best, obscurity, and at worst, daily humiliation, all of which they painstakingly record in their “Book of Bad”.

But at the start of Autumn Term in Year 12, a seemingly unconnected trio of events cause a seismic shift, and Bea finds herself becoming the “project” for Pennington’s own Regina George wannabe Nell Sawyer. Piece by piece, Nell dismantles the old Bea, and rebuilds version 2.0. with better hair, a whole new set of friends, and a ready-made Ken to go with the Barbie package. (Early synopsis for *Book of Bad*, Appendix 1)

These are the opening paragraphs of the first synopsis of what was then called *Book of Bad*. The title, two characters and what became a significant plot device were taken from a vaguely remembered Lucy Mangan column in the Guardian's *Weekend* magazine, where she'd described the notebook in which she and her friend had recorded the horrors that were inflicted on them at school for being 'geeks'. Transplanted from this column to my novel, this 'book of bad' would act as my 'vial of poison', its contents used by Nell in an attempt to destroy Caitlin.

While it would explore the same theme of identity as my three previous YA novels for Walker, and include a depiction of a psychopathological condition (NPD), *Book of Bad* would be a marked departure from these works. Though I had secured significant interest from my editors at both Walker and Little, Brown, *Book of Bad* was at that point uncommissioned, meaning I was free of publisher's expectations in terms of both deadline and content, and free to take some risks, pushing the boundaries of my own writing and, I hoped, of British YA.

Firstly, the tone would be distinctly different. *Eden*, *Undertow* and *Wonderland* are what are often termed 'quiet' novels; their language designed to be delicate and nuanced. Following an earlier experiment that manifested in a short story entitled 'The Movie Kiss' (Nadin, 2013g, see Appendix 3), *Book of Bad* would be loud; its content explicit, its characters smart-talking, its tone more akin to American high school movies, or the joint works of US authors David Levithan and Rachel Cohn.

To date, Levithan and Cohn have written four joint novels, two of which had had a profound effect on how I wanted to present teenagers: *Nick*

and Norah's Infinite Playlist (2006) and *Naomi and Ely's No-Kiss List* (2008).

These four teens are self-aware and savvy; they frequently speak in film quotes and drop hip pop culture references like 'whatevers' – a practice I had been discouraged from by Walker for fear of 'dating' work, and a practice I wanted to use to its fullest extent here, as I felt strongly that it better reflected the way adolescents communicate.

Secondly the book would have a different format through the inclusion of intertextual material, described in the synopsis as "'flashback" entries from the "Book of Bad" and locker notes etc.' (See Appendix 1) The sample text includes an example:

How can I be in the Book of Bad? I'm your best friend. Or did Petra Deeds finally invite you to her pool party and suddenly you're all Sherlock and Holmes together?

Cat

No, duh. But what if you went away? Then what would I do? I'd just be Sherlock. Or Holmes. Or more likely that woman who makes the tea.

Bea

(Sample text for *Book of Bad*, Appendix 1)

There would, however, be similarities to earlier work too.

I had exploited the destructive relationship between secrets and identity in *Undertow*, in which Billie searches for a father she has never known. He is eventually revealed as her lover Danny's uncle, making them first cousins. A similar incest storyline was eventually used as a plot device in

Queen Bea, but at this early stage of the novel I had imagined the revelation of secrets threatening not genetic identity but reputation and popularity. I wanted to explore those ‘truths’ we suppress in a bid to present the best possible self, a task that I felt was becoming harder as every message we send or photo we take now leaves an indelible trail on the internet. The election – in this early version of the novel, for prom queen – would be a test of that popularity, and a device to allow the digging for and outing of secrets.

The inclusion of an election was key for me. I had studied political campaigning at Masters level, only a year after Clinton’s first US campaign. I became fascinated with the way he had been ‘invented’ in the media as ‘The Man from Hope’, and wrote my thesis on the importance of image in the new public space of television, and how this, and the then-infant internet might reinvigorate democracy, opening it up to all-comers. Inspired, I pursued a career in political campaigning, first as a producer for ITV’s election coverage, then as an adviser to the Prime Minister Tony Blair, writing scripts for his television and radio appearances, and advising cabinet members on how to appeal to different audiences through language. I also spent two general elections working closely with the ‘attack’ unit at the Labour Party, which was dedicated to unearthing ‘truths’ about the opposition to use as ‘ammunition’. It was this experience that taught me both how candidates conjure up a crowd-friendly self and how the opposition attempts to aggressively ‘out’ them. This was a battle I believed was equally hard fought amongst teenagers.

Like my previous YA novels as well my middle grade fiction, I was writing in first person. My earliest books, all 5-8 adventure stories for Walker,

were written in third person, but my first teen novel, the semi-autobiographical *My So-Called Life*, took a diary form, necessitating a first person point of view, and I have used it frequently since. A large part of the drama of teenage life is conducted interiorly, minutiae can be magnified into mountains, and decisions can feel as though they will alter life profoundly and forever. First person conveys that in a way that the distance of third disavows. More than that, it seemed natural to me to ‘inhabit’ my characters.

As a trained actress (my first degree was in drama) and speechwriter, I had spent many years ‘living out’ either other people’s fictional creations or actual politicians, training myself to think like them, use their word choices, syntax, and accent. This is what I do now with my characters: I create and then become them, in order to know how they would react and what they would say in any given situation.

As such, this novel, like all my others, was really a commercial way of allowing me to indulge in my continuing exploration of other ‘selves’: the one I believed I was (here, Bea; previously Evie in *Eden*, Jude in *Wonderland*, and Billie in *Undertow*) and Nell, the one I wanted to be (a deliberate reincarnation of Stella from *Wonderland* and, confusingly I admit, Bea from *Eden*). In the sample text, I describe her as:

Part Barbie, part Basilisk, she acted as if she knew she was designed for a world with better lighting, and she ruled the school with a mix of loud self-confidence and quiet menace. If she wore purple Prada tights on Tuesday, by Friday half of years seven to twelve, not to mention the faculty, would be dressed in Primark knock-off. She singlehandedly made baby blue eyeshadow this season’s cyanotic must-have, and once wore a fur stole to council [...] Yet she did all of this with the same studied detachment of a paint by numbers Bond villainess [...] She was Cruella de Ville, the Snow Queen, the wicked

fairy on top of the tree, and me and Cat – we weren't even extras.
(*Book of Bad* sample text, Appendix 1)

Crucially, Nell would live by the motto 'What's the point in doing anything worthwhile if there's nobody watching' – a direct reference to a life lived online, and a direct quote from the pathological narcissist (or so I diagnosed her) Suzanne Stone from Gus Van Sant's 2004 film *To Die For*, a quote that was Blu-Tacked to my wall throughout the writing of *Queen Bea*.

In addition to Suzanne Stone, I had looked to other narcissistic fictional females as sources of inspiration, as well as for my proposed critical thesis, which would contextualise my own depiction of NPD in Nell against two other portrayals from novels of metamorphosis. It was the search for such women and such novels that led me to Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1950). This was, to me, the ultimate metamorphosis novel.⁴ It was also one I felt had narcissism at its heart, and a compelling facsimile of Fitzgerald's (now widely regarded as narcissistic) wife Zelda in the character Daisy Buchanan. This search also led me to a new discovery: Gordon Korman's YA retelling of the Gatsby story *Jake, Reinvented* (2005). It was the examination of this latter novel that forced my rethinking of Gatsby and of the endings of my previous transformation stories, and which precipitated a profound change in what I wanted to do with the crisis and resolution in *Queen Bea*.

⁴ By 'metamorphosis novel' I am suggesting a book that either describes the transformation of a protagonist or includes a protagonist who has undergone transformation, in itself either physical in terms of appearance, or in demeanour. Usually this will be for the purposes of increased social standing.

Failed metamorphosis in *The Great Gatsby* and *Jake, Reinvented*

In *Jake, Reinvented*, the ‘great’ Jay Gatsby, East coast socialite and war hero, is reimagined as Jake Garrett, a ‘lowly math tutor’ who has transferred schools and transformed himself into ‘a football player, a fashion statement, a legendary host, and a popularity machine—all to catch the eye of one girl.’ (Korman, 2005: 181) The girl Jake has set his sights on is Didi Ray, taking the role of Daisy Buchanan; Jake’s adversary is Didi’s quarterback (and playboy) boyfriend Todd Buckley as Tom Buchanan. Just as Jay Gatsby weaves himself a ‘fiction put together from other fictions’ (Berman, 1994: 3), Jake has effected a change of form using clothes, real estate and the right language – in his case, an ability to discuss football. The narrator, here called Rick Paradis, describes stumbling upon this evidence, and his realisation at the sleight of hand that had been carried out:

I pictured him poring over these catalogs, staring at the models in J. Crew and Banana Republic, piecing together a look for the new Jake, formerly Jacob, that would catch her eye and win her heart. I could almost see him with his Dad’s toolbox, installing the deadbolt on his bedroom door. Talk about a symbolic gesture. How many of us ever get the chance to lock away our old lives so we can reinvent ourselves from the ground up? (Korman, 2005: 189)

Like Fitzgerald with *Gatsby*, Korman keeps Jake’s metamorphosis ‘offscreen’ until after the reveal, denying the reader the immediate, vicarious thrill of the mirror moment, and forcing us for the majority of the novel into the position of curious observer with Rick, as well as determined detective alongside Todd. Thus we search the text for evidence of counterfeit and await the

inevitable unveiling with not only the expectation secured by the author's contract that 'this is a retelling of Gatsby', but also some degree of bloodlust.

Yet Korman ensures that we are aware that it is not just Jake who is faking it; everyone is testing out identities, altering appearance, playing a role. Didi's friend Jennifer observes of her: '[she] had an image to maintain—prom queen, supermodel, who's who in *Who's Who*.' (2005: 162) At one of Jake's parties, Rick notices: '...body piercing, dog collars, green hair, black leather. I saw the kid they called Poozer, who was famous for cleaning his fingernails with a razor-sharp army-surplus bayonet...' (2005: 45)

The Great Gatsby is similarly packed with references to artifice. Daisy describes Gatsby as 'the advertisement of the man' (Fitzgerald, 1950: 125). Elsewhere he is referred to as a 'regular Belasco' (1950: 52), Belasco being a Broadway producer renowned for the 'realistic illusions created by his sets' (Balkun, 2006: 165). The title itself includes the clearest of these allusions, the prefix 'Great' being reserved for conjurors and magicians. Furthermore, as critic Ronald Berman points out, 'Virtually all the major figures in *The Great Gatsby* are self-falsifying. They exist in a strange, dual relationship to themselves—sometimes, as in the case of Myrtle Wilson, actually living two lives.' (Berman, 1994: 74)

So if everyone is faking it, why are only Gatsby and Jake singled out for unmasking? And why is it done in such an aggressive manner? Berman observes of Fitzgerald's original that, when he realises the 'trick' that has been played, 'Tom Buchanan becomes more upset than when he finds out that Daisy is having an affair.' (1994: 64) Similarly, in Korman's version Rick describes the absurd level of Todd's outrage at being fooled, saying he

‘sounded more like a prosecutor than a guy at a party. He was revealing evidence, presenting arguments, asking the jury to throw the book at this outlaw.’ (Korman, 2005: 169-70) His classmates are no less incensed, sporting ‘expressions that were close to triumphant. *By God, we knew there was something not quite right about Jake Garrett! We suspected it all along! We’re mad as hell and we’re not going to take it anymore!*’ (2005: 170)

Why do Todd and his friends so detest Jake? Not because Jake almost won Didi, but because he almost fooled everyone: ‘In creating his new self,’ says Rick, ‘and placing it at the center of their world, he had beaten them at their own game. They were never going to forgive him for that.’ (2005: 203) So why does Didi reject him? ‘Jake was sweet,’ says Jennifer, ‘but life isn’t *Revenge of the Nerds*... Caterpillars aren’t her type, she’ll only go for a finished butterfly.’ (2005: 163) It was these dismissals that rankled me, and that I felt needed further investigation.

In Fitzgerald’s and Korman’s fictional worlds, there are those who are born butterflies – the Buchanans and Todd Buckley – and those who are destined to remain caterpillars – Gatsby and Garrett. Yes, this is a realistic portrayal, in that we tend not to tolerate people who have more than one identity: terms like ‘two-faced’ and ‘duplicitous’ have continuing currency; gossip columns that unveil the ‘truth’ behind the public persona sell in their thousands, allowing readers to take pleasure in the moments models and actresses are revealed as less than perfect, or politicians as more (or less) than the selfless philanthropists they purport to be. My problem was that, however realistic the ending might be, the implication that it is impossible to escape the

self one is assigned by birth or society felt like an endorsement of stasis and an outdated class system.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Sarah Churchwell ascribes Gatsby's unmaking to the faith he placed in 'America's lies: that meritocracy is real, that you can make yourself into whatever you want to be' (Churchwell, 2013). But did that mean every person, every character in YA fiction who attempted metamorphosis had to be unmade? Yes, it is hard to escape one's roots, but, as a British socialist, as well as a believer in the American Dream, I refused to accept it was impossible. More than that, I felt it was something to be encouraged, including by writers, and writers of young adult literature especially. YA authors are guides, leading readers through the liminality of adolescence, (Eaton, 2013) but we are mapmakers, too, charting that space. As such, I had always believed that we have a responsibility to portray the landscape as it really is. Now I began to wonder if we had the chance to show that world as it could or should be. In which case, I asked myself, could I be the one to take that chance?

I looked back at my own work: at the exhortations I had put into the mouths of others to 'be yourself'; at the ending of *Wonderland* in which Jude is forced to 'kill off' her alter Stella; at *Eden* in which James is unmasked as Penn, and Evie forced to admit the summer of being Bea has been a sham. I began to ask questions: Why are we so chained to our parentage and upbringing? Why can't we attempt, as Gatsby and Jake did, to become someone else; someone better, more brilliant? And why do we feel such an urge to unmask those who do try it? Why, too, are my own changes of appearance, as well as career, dismissed by friends and acquaintances as

something unsavoury or untrustworthy; as ‘insincere’ in the mould of Dorian Gray, or, once, as ‘Mitty-like’? As I pondered these queries, I began to feel disquiet about the planned ending of *Book of Bad*, which condemned my protagonist Bea to the same fate as Jake: a return to the geek she had previously been written off as, however accepting of that she might be. I began to wonder whether there was an alternative – a way to allow the new incarnations to remain as viable selves, possibly even ‘true’ selves. But these were not my only doubts.

I had originally ascribed to Nell a diagnosis of NPD, hoping to imbue in her the same seductive, but destructive qualities I felt Daisy and Didi possessed. But the more I studied these women, the more I saw them not as aberrations, but rather bolder depictions of the same vanity and need for validation so many of us display. In addition, the more I began to research the personality disorder, the more I began to recognise traits of narcissism in myself as well as in the teenagers I wrote for and about.

The new narcissism

The morning goes like this:

I reach across the vacant space in my double bed, check my iPhone or iPad for Facebook notifications: Who has messaged Me? Who has tagged Me? More importantly, who has ‘liked’ Me? I post a status update about Me. I flick to Twitter to over-share my waking thoughts, because everyone needs to hear what *I* have to say. I flick back, change my profile picture to one that

better shows off my hard-won low weight, better reflects the positive Me I am today – a selfie signing books at Hay. Famous Me! Successful Me!

Look at Me!

I pull on a dress that reveals my surgically altered cleavage. I coat my hair in products that tame my grandmother's curls; I paint on concealer that hides my grandfather's dark circles, mascara that promises the look of fake lashes while proclaiming on its packaging 'They're Real', blusher that suggests I may just be in post-coital flush. And all the while I gaze at my reflection in one of the too-many mirrors that adorn my bedroom walls, or the oh-so-convenient cameras on my iPhone, iPad, iMac.

Do I sound vain? Self-obsessed? Shallow? Well I should. I am a child of the 1970s, after all – of Tom Wolfe's 'Me Decade' (Wolfe, 1976). But, I am told, compared to today's teenagers my symptoms are slight. Compared to them I am a pretender, a charlatan, a poseur. Because, pity them, they are caught in the grip of nothing less than an epidemic. Their accusers: Jean M. Twenge, an American psychology professor and author of *Generation Me* (2006) and *The Narcissism Epidemic* (2009); and the British scientist, baroness, and former director of the Royal Institution, Susan Greenfield, author of *id* (2009a).

I picked up these books with good intentions, albeit an agenda: I wanted to know what was happening to young people's minds and sense of self (and my own); I wanted to know if and why we were more narcissistic than previous generations, and if so whether the internet was to blame and how I might convey that; and I wanted to know if I might somehow help

teenagers (and indeed myself) understand the changes through this novel. I put them down with a sense of outrage.

In *id* and, later, *Mind Change* (2014), Greenfield paints a dystopic future as bleak and barren as any penned by Suzanne Collins in *The Hunger Games* (2009) or Moira Young in *Blood Red Road* (2012): a ‘toxic’ (Greenfield, 2009a: 153) world of teenagers who are increasingly narcissistic (2014: 122) and lacking in empathy (2014: 279); their selves merely constructs (2014: 121); their sense of identity ‘softened’ (2009a: 5) by excessive exposure to entertainment media, and social networking in particular (2014: 117). ‘Identity’ asserts Greenfield, ‘is likely to become an increasingly transparent, fragile and questionable entity as this century unfolds,’ (2009a: 131). Brains will be so altered as to render a generation of young adults with the immature mindset of children, drug-takers, the obese, gamblers and schizophrenics (2014: 99). The natural conclusion of this, she asserts, is an inert mass of reactionary ‘nobodies’ (2009a: 15) or ‘avatars’, (2009a: 206) living their lives solely according to the instructions of others.

Twenge is similarly pessimistic. In *Generation Me* (Twenge, 2006) and *The Narcissism Epidemic* (Twenge, 2009), she depicts teenagers in the grip of narcissism so endemic that it’s regarded as ‘whatever’ (2006: 137). Told they’re special from toddlerhood (2006: 4), overindulged by parents and teachers, fed a constant diet of trash TV and trash novels, and with most of their downtime spent in solitary online confinement, they believe the hype that they really are unique, that they can ‘be anything they want to be’ (2006: 72). As a result, they feel no sense of duty or obligation (2006: 6), they’re

materialistic (2006:44), antisocial (2009: 196), their friends are phony (2009: 4), their relationships doomed (2009: 221).

Every decade has its self-appointed Cassandras and its devils in disguise: electricity, the telephone, movies. Elvis's hips, my grandmother told me, were tipped to loosen the morals of an entire gender. The Sony Walkman, I vaguely recall, was supposed to trap us in its solipsistic grip, rendering public space private. And teenagers are ever the fools who fall for these new-fangled ideas, including the promise of being someone else.

In 1928, the anthropologist Margaret Mead pinpointed the source of youthful distress to America's 'theory of endless possibilities' (Mead, 2001: 162), particularly, the doctrine of shortcuts to fame. She saw the media as aggravating the situation, peddling what she called a 'Cinderella' complex: 'Moving picture, magazine, newspaper, all reiterate the Cinderella story in one way or another.' (2001: 162)

Mead made these accusations in the wake of several years spent studying female coming-of-age rituals in Samoa – a stark contrast to the hedonism of America's flappers. In light of this I felt that Twenge and Greenfield, in unconscious imitation of Mead, may have been viewing their own childhoods (their Samoan equivalent) with rose-tinted glasses. As such this should have been easy to dismiss as golden-age thinking – that belief that past eras are so much more ideal than our own – particularly given that Twenge's methods and findings have been disproved (Trzesniewski et al, 2008)⁵ and Greenfield's discredited (Robbins, 2014; Cornwell, 2008). But these are reports buried in journals, or broadsheets. The tabloid headlines

⁵ This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

they've left in their wake remained etched on my, and so, I assumed, others', imaginations as confirmations of a generation damned. Mud sticks, and I felt it had adhered to me.

Why? Because I recognised myself as one of the 'diseased': a narcissist who lives predominantly online, in a world where the borders of 'real' and 'fake' are increasingly blurred. Because as a YA novelist I have spent the last ten years of my life writing for and about these teenagers; I have championed them and their interest in identity, portraying it as natural, even desirable, yet now I felt it was being dismissed as nothing more than vanity and self-obsession. Above all because, according to Twenge, these very novels were in part to blame, feeding the narcissism that so plagues their subjects: 'Kids are even learning narcissism while reading,' she claims (2009: 103). Citing series like *Gossip Girl* and *The Clique*, she laments the celebration of vacuity, the casual sex, the self-tans. Instead, she says, we should all be reading Harry Potter, 'which focuses on courage, teamwork and friendship' (2009: 104), and leaves the narcissism 'with the bad guys, where it belongs' (2009: 106).

Ignoring the fact that she confuses a middle-grade novel with a young adult one, this is a serious accusation. I had believed that, as a writer of YA, in particular quest-for-self novels, I was helping teenagers negotiate that move into adulthood. Now I felt I was being told that I was conspiring – albeit unwittingly – to condemn them to a perpetual self-obsessed adolescence. Coming close behind my increasing unease with the inherent message of metamorphosis stories ('don't bother'), this became the tipping point for *Queen Bea*. As a YA writer, about to embark on another quest-for-self novel

as part of a doctorate embracing this very subject of self and self-obsession, I felt compelled to grapple with their ideas, and, if possible, offer an alternative voice. The problem was, I had no clear idea what my argument was, still less where to start looking for ammunition.

Then, as so frequently happens in novels but so rarely in real life, fortuity stepped in, fairytale-like, in the form of a meeting with the novelist Emily Mackie. To her I took my early synopsis, my new, but vague thoughts on metamorphosis, as well as my blurry questions on Twenge and Greenfield's assertions. I left with a clear route map to lead me to my answers; Chapter 2 lays out this map in detail.

2. Evidence for transformation: A mutable, multiple self and necessary narcissism

Meeting Mackie

A friend of a more-than-friend, we are introduced in a Bristol café in the third month of my study. I stammer out my sense that Twenge and Greenfield are somehow wrong about narcissism, alongside an elevator pitch of the novel and thesis as they stand.

‘It’s about the quest for identity,’ I say. ‘You know, “be yourself”, “find yourself”. The whole Disney, high-school-movie thing.’

Mackie nods with such apparent understanding and enthusiasm I feel the thrill of validation like a blood rush. ‘It’s bogus,’ she says. ‘There is no “self”.’

And there I see it: the first flash of my magic amulet.

It wasn’t mere coincidence; I had hankered after a meeting with Mackie for a while, on the back of my fascination with her first novel *And This Is True*. But that rainy, cold afternoon on the Gloucester Road, amongst the dregs of coffee, churros and chocolate sauce, felt like nothing less than serendipity, my very own inciting incident. Because Mackie, it transpired, was as obsessed with self as I, but at this point better read.

In the midst of researching her second novel – an investigation into the very nature of identity – Mackie had questioned whether or not self existed as an essential, singular thing, and come up with a resounding ‘no’. Her novel, at

that point untitled, would posit self as mutable and multiple, and a construct of those around us.

‘I don’t exist except through you,’ she continues. And then drops the cherry on the cake she has already iced, and hands it to me on a plate: ‘You need to read *The Self Illusion*,’ she says. ‘Bruce Hood. It’ll change the way you see everything. That and Baggini’s *Ego Trick*. I’d start with them, if I were you.’

And so I did, and for that I owe Mackie a debt, as these two books become not only my first steps, but also my lodestars throughout the journey of researching and writing *Queen Bea*.

A mutable, multiple self

Published just months apart in 2011, *The Self Illusion* by Professor Bruce Hood, a specialist in cognitive neuroscience, and *The Ego Trick* by philosopher Julian Baggini set out (albeit with nuanced differences⁶) the same basic premise: That self as a solid, stable, singular entity – something locatable and quantifiable – does not exist. That what we think of as ‘self’ – the essential ‘me-ness’ (Baggini, 2011: 3) we feel – is an illusion, a trick played by the mind to give us a sense of wholeness. Self, in Baggini’s and Hood’s conceptions, is not an object, but a construct or process; a story we tell ourselves about ourselves. Both also assert (Hood more emphatically so) that that process is not solipsistic, but dialogic – constructed in concert with those

⁶ While their premises and conclusions are broadly similar, Baggini and Hood do differ in their interpretation of this ‘illusion’ or ‘trick’. For Baggini the self remains ‘real’ even if it is not what it ‘we generally assume it to be’ (2011: 151) (his definition of an illusion). Hood insists this is ‘wrong’ (Hood in response to a question from the author, Early Researchers’ Conference, Bath Spa, 4 June 2015).

around us. This term ‘dialogic’ has its roots in the philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories on language (Bakhtin, 1982). For Bakhtin, all thought is dialogical, so anything we say is in response to things that have been said before and in anticipation of things that will be said in response. In other words, we do not speak in a vacuum. In this thesis I apply it to self to suggest that self does not exist in a vacuum, but is a response and pre-empt to many people. Thus, we are as much the product of our friends, our family, and even fiction, as we are our own experiences, desires and dislikes.

The argument goes like this: each of us has some feeling of ‘me-ness’: of both existence as a separate being, and of the nature of that being. And that me-ness is remarkably enduring, despite our ever-changing circumstances, tastes and relationships. As such we tend to conceive of identity as a single, stable, and somehow solid thing, and yet no-one can say where exactly this pearl called ‘self’ resides, to the point that neuroscience, as Baggini puts it, ‘has given up on the search’ (2011: 28). The reason for this abandonment? Because self is not something the brain possesses, it is something the brain does; a ‘symphony’ played by the ‘orchestra of different brain processes’ (Hood, 2011: xi).

Baggini calls this the ‘ego trick’; for Hood it is the ‘self illusion’, but both suggest the same idea that wholeness is effect rather than cause, as the mind draws on memory and manages to convince us that we are unified. And it does that because we are all masters of fiction. As Hood puts it, ‘Who we are is the story of our self – a constructed narrative that our brain creates.’ (2011: xi). For Baggini, we write ourselves into being by constructing an

‘autobiographical narrative that links experiences over time’ (2011: 40). It is this narrative that creates the feeling of unity, a feeling so compelling that ‘it becomes natural to think of ourselves as beings with clear boundaries [...] This is false. We are fluid, ever-changing, amorphous selves.’ (Baggini, 2011: 140) Key to Baggini’s (and subsequently to my own) thinking is that this narrative itself isn’t an unchangeable text, but can be revised and rewritten to absorb inconsistencies and maintain coherence.

This was appealing to me both as a writer and on a personal level: a note written at the time declares triumphantly ‘SELF IS A STORY!’ The idea of narrating one’s self validated my instinctive feeling, as well as Fitzgerald’s and Korman’s insinuations, that we all conjure up our ‘self’ to a greater or lesser extent. By implication, it also altered the potential ending of my novel as any transformation no longer needed to be an attempt at a single, permanent switch (which could then be unmasked), but rather an ongoing process. This, as my exclaimed note hints, would become a central tenet of *Queen Bea*. It had to, I told myself, because I could no longer justify encouraging teenagers to embark on a straightforward ‘quest for self’ if self was not something that could be found, but something we did. As such this – the first strand of Baggini’s and Hood’s theories – had, in my mind, profound relevance not just for my piece but for YA literature more broadly. The second strand effected no less a seismic shift in my thinking, because what Hood in particular goes on to argue is that we don’t even write this ‘story’ ourselves. Self is not a monologue, constructed by our mind in isolation, but the product of an ongoing conversation; it is *dialogic*.

The idea that we are partly what others perceive us to be struck me first as the stuff of adolescent nightmare; a damning confirmation that looks matter, that labels stick, that we are what we wear, say, listen to. The evidence is, however, overwhelming. Hood and Baggini cast those with whom we interact – our family, friends, idols, even fictional characters – in the role of meaning-givers. This does not erase us as ‘authors’ of our selves; instead these people are co-creators with whom we engage in a constant process of negotiation between the way we perceive ourselves and the way we perceive others to perceive ourselves. We are, Hood argues, ‘a product of those around us, or at least what we believe they expect from us’ (2011: 51). In simple terms, other people – and by extension, their opinions – matter.

So we think of our self, at least in part, according to what others think, and even according to what we think they think. This offered me the first hint of an explanation as to why we – especially in adolescent years – mould our selves to fit better with the shape of the crowd: we copy their clothes, their hairstyles, their mix CDs; we adopt their modes of speech, their morals (the very process I had depicted in my Rachel Riley novels, as well as in *Eden* and *Wonderland*). Is this weakness? I wondered. The sign of an atrophied self, able to do no more than follow the herd? Or might it, actually, be favourable? Necessary, even? Hood thinks so, giving the concept a neurological explanation in the recently discovered ‘mirror neurons’. These synapses ‘appear to fire in sympathy’ (Hood, 2011: 42) when watching other people, eliciting a mirroring action. For Hood this process is akin to resonance: ‘It’s like when you are in a guitar salesroom and strike the ‘G’ string loudly enough on one guitar, all the other ‘G’ strings on all the other guitars will

eventually vibrate.’ (2011: 151) But, according to him, this unconscious mimicry, this attempt to ‘fit in’, is not a fault, nor default, but design; a survival method, mirroring ‘binds us to others’ (2011: 151). Self is socially constructed in order for society to thrive.

It is important to say this theory does not render us mere puppets, or chameleons. Rather, it reveals that, far from being driven exclusively from the inside out, the being we project onto the world and that we use to negotiate the world, is as much a product of that world as it is producer. Whether it is unconscious mirroring, or the conscious drive to be one of the crowd (or, indeed, stand out from it), self is a two-way street. This was key to my thinking on metamorphosis in the subtle distinction between a self that *emerges* in reaction to external influence, which implies authenticity, versus one that is *assumed*, which implies it is pure masquerade – stolen or handed to one and worn as no more than a suit of clothes.

So self is not an immutable essence, but dialogic. But even the word ‘dialogic’ is misleading, because it is not one negotiation we have with the world but many, and in ever-increasing number, which led me to what Baggini describes as the ‘obvious’ question: ‘Once the idea of the unitary self is fractured, should we not take this one stage further and accept that in the absence of a strongly singular ‘I’, there must be a weakly multiple “we”?’ (2011: 83)

This idea of the self as manifold is one that, historically, has tended to be confined to psychiatric units, and in literary terms to gothic horror: from the doubling of Jekyll and Hyde, and Dorian Gray on the page, to the split personalities of Sybil on the big screen, the popular view of multiple

personality is as a psychopathological state, a disorder now known as ‘Dissociative Identity’ (DID). This was the diagnosis I gave Jude in my novel *Wonderland*, albeit only at the insistence of my editor, who felt readers needed to know that this state of mind was not ‘normal’. Originally I had imagined Stella as more of an imaginary friend, a photoshopped version of Jude; as Stella says, ‘I look how you want to look. I talk how you want to talk. All the ways you wish you could be, that’s me.’ (2014d: 193) The last sentence spoken by Stella is a quote from the film *Fight Club* (2009), widely accepted as another portrayal of DID. Psychology professor Steven N. Gold argues a different slant: he believes the film ‘illustrates how social, cultural and interpersonal forces can promote sub-clinical and even normative forms of dissociation’. (Gold, 2004: 13) He is not alone in seeing ‘multiplicity’ as ‘normative’.

‘[S]elves’ asserts Rita Carter, a medical writer specialising in neuroscience, ‘do not come one to a person, but are created by that person in as many forms and as great or small as number as is required. Multiplicity of mind is not some strange aberration, but the natural state of human being.’ (Carter, 2008: xiv) Each interaction, according to Carter, produces a new self, accumulating into what she terms a ‘family’ (2008: 21). Crucially for Carter, and for my own thinking, these identities are not ‘fake’, an insincere act put on purely to manipulate; they are genuine creations, ‘honest reflection[s] of inner self’ (2008: 15). They are, in this sense, akin to the many selves that can be delineated in DID.

In this brutal condition, a series of alters is created in order to cope with – or block out – childhood trauma, often sexual abuse. But these alters do

not share memory, they exist in separate ‘houses’, whereas multiplicity of self, as Carter puts it, is an ‘open-plan’ arrangement (2008: 17). The right self is assumed for the right situation, and those situations are on the increase as we interact with more and more people in more and more different ways. As such, far from being detrimental to our mental health, multiplicity is a natural adaption to the world we now live in. It should be noted that when I refer to multiplicity or ‘multiple selves’, I use this both to indicate selves that are sequential, swapped one for another over a period of time, as well as selves that are relational, that co-exist, and can be flipped between on a rapid basis. Both of these manifest in *Queen Bea*, though the novel’s conclusion focuses on the latter.

American psychologist Kenneth Gergen sets out the key cause in this transformation: technological progress. For him, the move from boundaried, isolated hamlets to the global village we now inhabit has altered the self by ‘producing a radical shift in our exposure to each other’ (Gergen, 2000: ix). The railroad, post, the car, the telephone, radio, the cinema and books all brought people into closer proximity, and ‘foster[ed] a range of relationships that could never have occurred before.’ (2000a: 53) Air transport and television expanded this on an international basis. However, it is electronic communication – email, search engines, blogs and social media – that proliferate these possibilities on an infinite basis.

We open up our laptops in our bedrooms and ‘chat’ to ‘friends’ on the other side of the world. Instead of joining chess club, we play chess – or a variety of games – online with people we have never met, and may never meet. And it’s not just ‘real’ people we are exposed to; we now find ourselves

interacting with an increasing number of celebrities, as well as fictional creations – characters from soap operas and box sets with their own Twitter accounts or avatars that inhabit the world of online games. In simple terms, we no longer grow up in a community of twenty, thirty people, remaining in the family home and marrying the boy or girl next door. We are now increasingly as likely to be influenced in our looks, behaviour and morals by Kim Kardashian or even fictional TV private eye Veronica Mars, as we are our own best friend or mother. We are almost as likely to marry a partner we meet via an internet dating site or app as we are the kid who sat next to us in science. The self that emerges from this soup is a pastiche, a living bricolage assembled from myriad different images – some real, some invented; a self that Gergen terms ‘saturated’. So Greenfield, in one sense, was right: identity has become an increasingly ‘fragile and questionable entity’ (Greenfield, 2009a: 131). However, questioning the self and opening it to external influence does not erase it. Rather, self as fragile, and potentially fictional and multiple, may be prolonging our existence.

For philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, the discovery of the constructed nature of self ‘does not eliminate my capacities for commitment and trust but makes them literally playable.’ (Kristeva, 1987: 7-8) Carter is more emphatic, citing this adaptability not just as fun, but essential: ‘If we are to swim in a disjointed and ever-changing world we need more than ever to pull on our ability to see things from multiple viewpoints and to adopt multiple behaviours in different situations.’ (Carter, 2008: 79) Natural selection, she intimates, will triumph: ‘Those very integrated people [...] are becoming dinosaurs,’ she says, ill-equipped to deal with ‘a multicultural, very

fast-moving, very dynamic sort of culture.’ (Carter, in Baggini, 2011: 199) So, yes, the internet has changed us. But it has not rendered each of us a ‘nobody’, as Greenfield feared, rather a plethora of ‘somebodies’.

The implications of this for *Queen Bea* were manifold. Not only was ‘the search for an “essential” or “authentic” self [...] doomed to failure’, (Carter, 2008: xv) but the answer to the question ‘Who am I?’ became ‘a teeming world of provisional possibilities.’ (Gergen 2000a: 139) More thrillingly to me, this pliability, and multiplicity is also, according to Carter, freeing, a way of transcending our genetic inheritance, and circumstances of birth.

One reason for the burgeoning interest in personal metamorphosis is that until recently most people weren’t allowed to do it. Lives were constrained by duty, custom, limited horizons, and a culture that feared and suspected change. Now, suddenly we find ourselves in a world where flexibility, adaptability and personal reinvention are not just acceptable but positively encouraged. (Carter, 2008: 75)

So the constructed, multiple self is democratising, too. And I wondered if therein lay an unarticulated fear behind the voices of detractors like Mead, Greenfield and Twenge: that, if we can all be who we want to be, some people will get ideas above their station. As Sartre puts it: ‘A grocer who dreams is offensive to the buyer, because such a grocer is not wholly a grocer. Society demands that he limit himself...’ (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, quoted in Goffman, 1969: 66) It is this principle – the drive for reality, or for supposed authenticity – that is behind the need to reveal those Pygmals as the flower girls they are; behind Tom Buchanan’s and Todd Buckley’s need to unmask the social climbers Jay Gatsby and Jake Garrett. But, under the new

terms and conditions, if all self is construction, then terms such as ‘ersatz’, ‘imposter’ and ‘inauthentic’ lose their emotive currency. Bea could no longer be unmasked and declared a ‘charlatan’, or even a ‘chameleon’, because we are all both, and, as such, these words can be reclaimed as positives.

My search began in 1978 in an Essex bedroom and progressed across decades and miles and through endless costume changes to find a self that suited, all the while afraid that my metamorphoses would be discovered not as the ugly duckling’s once-and-forever transformation into a swan, or caterpillar to butterfly, but as a hermit crab borrowing another’s ill-fitting shell, or a cuckoo in the nest. Likewise, I had, albeit unwittingly, been leading readers on something of a wild goose chase. Instead of allowing them to enjoy the experience of mutability through my protagonists, I had encouraged them to choose a single ‘true’ self. Yet here in front of me was the evidence I needed to assert that every one of these selves was real.

This was the controlling idea that I decided would be behind *Queen Bea*: that the quest for self was not a search for a single truth, but rather a plethora of potential selves, dependent not on heredity or circumstance, but on choice, as well as the books we read, the films we watch, and the friends we make in the ‘real’ world and the cyber one, meaning that metamorphosis could be replaced by a series of metamorphoses. My protagonists would remain adolescents trying out selves for size, both in the mirror and on social media, and they would still be hellbent on outing each other. Now, though, I would find a way to convey to them and my readers that ‘truth’ and thus ‘true self’ is contingent, dependent on who is viewing what, and whom, when.

‘Authenticity’ of voice took on a new meaning too: these ‘saturated selves’ would be magpies, borrowing lines from 1980s high school films and TV detectives as well as classic fiction; name-dropping their influences and revealing their constructed nature without flinching. This itself would become a mammoth, though not arduous, task for me, trawling through my own film archive as well as numerous box sets, books and online blogs.

Before I began that work, however, I had another pressing question to answer. Having found an appealing argument that multiplicity was not only normative, but desirable, was it possible there were similar theories on narcissism? Given my own identification as a narcissist (but one lacking any psychiatric or psychoanalytical intervention or, I suspected, the need for it), I felt and hoped there would be, because these might give me the evidence I needed to drop any pathological diagnosis for Stella (as I had decided to name the new Nell, a direct reference to her earlier incarnation in *Wonderland*). I was not disappointed, unearthing ideas that would allow me to argue that self-obsession is not only the prerogative, but also the purpose of adolescence.

Self-obsession as inherent not indulgent

August 1976, and in suburban Essex I have retreated to the shady solitude of a deckchair fort. It is two years before my self-awakening, but the seeds of this soon-to-be obsession are scattered everywhere in this sunburned, lolly-dripped landscape: in the warm, flat dregs of Sodastream cola that still thrill with me with their newness and possibility, and in the Polaroids of me drinking them; in the ‘playroom’ I can spy on through a crack in striped fabric

– a whole room of toys dedicated entirely to my brother and me – and in the woman currently occupying it, a working-class wife of a middle-class husband, performing yoga in her ‘me time’. I, only six at the time, fail to see the peril in this idyll. But across the Atlantic someone has been watching the wannabes like us, and an entire nation is being alerted to our shortcomings, as American journalist Tom Wolfe takes to *New York* magazine to announce that we are in the midst of the ‘Me Decade’ (Wolfe, 1976).

High on the proceeds of the post-war boom, my parents now had the money to do what was once the preserve of the elite. They, and I by default, were not merely changing the circumstances of our lives – moving up a class – but attempting to locate, and then alter our very selves, ‘realizing our potential as human beings’ (Wolfe, 1976). We were, in Wolfe’s semi-dystopic vision, indulging in the ‘new alchemical dream: changing one’s personality – remaking, remodeling, elevating and polishing one’s very self... and observing, studying, and doting on it. (Me!)’ (1976) We were Sartre’s grocers who dared to dream.

Fast forward thirty years and Twenge takes up Wolfe’s vision with zeal, firing not just at 1960s and 1970s self-awareness, but at the 1980s self-esteem movement that was established in its wake. The result is a generation that ‘speaks the language of the self as their native tongue’ (Twenge, 2006: 2). But, far from being liberating, she sees in this lingual ability only an obsession with appearance, rampant materialism and destructive cynicism.

Three years later, she demonises this ‘self’ obsession further. In *The Narcissism Epidemic* Twenge sees narcissism ‘everywhere’ (2009: 1): in the pursuit of beauty, including the proliferation of plastic surgery (2009: 148)

even among the very young; in the veneration of celebrity (2009: 91); and in the advent of social networking sites Facebook, YouTube and (already defunct) MySpace. These may be, she asserts ‘the second inflection point’ (2009: 69) for the growth of the epidemic. As she sees it, the internet allows the ‘fantasy principle’ to trump the ‘reality principle’ in three ways: a) by focusing on shallowness and surface rather than depth (in both appearance and relationships), b) by granting access to a wide audience for one’s self-musings and postulations, and, c) by allowing you to be someone you’re not (2009: 122).

Twenge’s evidence for the epidemic isn’t purely anecdotal. Having conducted a series of interviews on college students using the standard Narcissism Personality Index (NPI) – a series of paired statements, for example: ‘I am much like everybody else’ versus ‘I am an extraordinary person’ (2009: 9) – she appears to have the statistics to back up her sweeping generalisations, with narcissism rising ‘just as fast as obesity’ from the 1980s to 2009. Her predicted trajectory is no less damning, claiming 54 per cent of the 20-29 age group may develop full blown Narcissistic Personality Disorder – the pathological extreme of the narcissistic condition – by the time they’re 65 (2009: 37). Her solution to avoid this catastrophe is the same as one would implement for any viral epidemic: quarantine, both for narcissists, and for those activities that encourage narcissism.

‘You don’t need to admire yourself, you don’t need to express yourself to exist’ (2009: 289) Twenge insists. But life, for me, is about more than ‘existence’. More questions began to form: Does the cure really have to be a retreat into asceticism, and the diligent avoidance of anyone who self-tans, has

plastic surgery, updates their status too often, or posts one too many selfies? Do I really want to be telling teenagers to stop dreaming? More importantly, is the prognosis really that bad? Or is it possible that what Twenge sees as the spread of an epidemic is no more than increased visibility of a condition that might actually be an adaptation to postmodernity and the saturated self? Historian Elizabeth Lunbeck believes the latter.

The timeline, at its most basic, looks like this: In the early 1970s, in the US, émigré psychoanalysts Heinz Kohut and Otto Kernberg published landmark works that both revived interest in narcissism and redefined it post-Freud. This included, in 1971, Kohut's identification of Narcissistic Personality Disorder, a term that took less than a decade to enter the industry standard *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. American social critic Christopher Lasch then took narcissism to a broader audience, establishing it as 'a staple of popular debate' (Lunbeck, 2014a: 13). By the end of the 'Me Decade', the 'affliction' was 'a fact of social life and the focus of widespread concern' (2014a: 13) and by the 2000s, narcissism had become the 'go-to diagnosis by columnists, bloggers and TV psychologists' (*New York Times*, quoted in Twenge, 2009), as well as a term of abuse tossed casually into conversation to double for anything from 'vanity' to 'ambition', and volleyed indiscriminately at celebrities from 'Tiger Woods to the Obamas' (Cusk, 2013). It is this morally freighted term that may be the seed of the problem, as it is a distortion of what narcissism is and means.

Lunbeck sets out a powerful argument for the reclamation of the word and the rehabilitation of the condition in *The Americanization of Narcissism* (2014a), pinpointing the problem to Lasch's and others' convenient ignorance

of one of Kohut's key contentions: that narcissism was normative, necessary and even desirable. Where Kernberg 'focused on narcissism's darker side [...] describing [...] destructiveness, rage, and aggression as well as the masterful ways in which they enslaved their hapless victims', Kohut reframed the word, 'underscor[ing] narcissism's positive aspects, arguing that it fueled individuals [...] creativity and fellow-feeling' and was a 'dimension of mature selfhood'. (2014a: 3) Furthermore, he celebrated that decade's preoccupation with self 'that social critics found intellectually bankrupt and morally suspect', (2014a: 39) showing scant interest in the vogue for 'nostalgia for a lost American Eden' (2014a: 40). Twenge, however, conveniently ignores Kohut and his well-rounded, successful and satisfied selves, preferring to press Kernberg's demons into service.

Twenge's studies omit the view that some of the traits revealed by the NPI may be adaptive, even desirable. Instead she laments that 75 per cent of students interviewed report that they are 'satisfied with themselves' (Twenge, 2009: 9) compared to just 66 per cent in 1975. Yet surely being happy with one's self is a positive outcome? There were increases too in 'I see myself as good leader', 'I am assertive', as well as 'I am an important person', which, as Lunbeck points out, may well be indicative of healthy narcissism (Lunbeck, 2014a: 263). Lunbeck also asserts that higher scores may merely be down to Generation Me's familiarity with the 'language of self esteem' (2014a: 263). And she is not alone in seeing normative qualities, and even advantages.

Disputing Twenge et al's research in the same journal, Trzesniewski et al not only debunk Twenge's sampling methods, but also highlight that, 'Only some NPI facets seem to be socially toxic [...] whereas others seem to be [...]

potentially adaptive.’ (Trzesniewski et al, 2008: 910) Rachel Cusk, writing in the *New Statesman*, describes narcissism as a catch-all term for nearly every quality required to succeed: ‘ambition, determination, vision, self-belief’ (Cusk, 2013). Unconsciously conjuring Gergen’s saturated selves, she goes on to assert that, ‘there is an extent to which a person needs to be another person’s projection, their construction, an inner space that is and ought to remain vacated in order for the social dynamic to function’ (2013). Even Twenge’s co-researcher and co-writer W. Keith Campbell admits that, ‘narcissism may be a functional and healthy strategy for dealing with the modern world’ (W. Keith Campbell, quoted in Lunbeck 2014a: 263).

There’s a further consideration, too, and one I felt was particularly pertinent to YA literature: Lunbeck quotes an article in *Time* magazine that points to the young being denounced as ‘so selfish’ as early as 1911 (2014a: 264). Could it be that the symptoms of the epidemic cited by Twenge, undeniable in their existence – the selfies, the social networking, the relentless pursuit of self-creation and self-curation – are simply a more visible rendering of something innocuous, something innate: the adolescent quest for identity?

Identity in adolescence

Adolescence⁷ is an age of swift and relentless change: physical growth, genital maturation, a new social awareness, (Erikson, 1968: 87) and a

⁷ Adolescence as a specific age range is contested. The psychologist Stanley Hall, in his defining work *Adolescence*, defined it as the ‘ten years from twelve to fourteen to twenty-one or twenty-five in girls and boys, respectively.’ (Hall, quoted in Savage: 2008: 66) By 1990, Feldman and Elliott described it as ‘extending roughly from age 10 or 11 through the late teens and even into the early 20s) Discrepancy is, in part, due to the increasingly early arrival of puberty and in part due to the fact that adolescence is as much socially constructed as it is

‘dramatic shift towards introspection’ (Feldman and Elliott, 1990: 362). Thus, where childhood and early adolescence is marked by a marveling at ‘I am’ – the simple act of existing – middle and late adolescence places that ‘I’ in context, and we become preoccupied instead with that central concern ‘who am I?’ (Harter, 1990: 362) It is this question that drives the adolescent quest for identity, that urgent and sometimes desperate need to crystallise our place in society. This mission is characterised by a testing out of possible selves (trying on their clothes, sometimes literally) and a rejection of parental company and values in favour of peers’ as we try to work out where we fit in and how we can stand out; what Hood calls ‘this chaotic period of self-construction’ (2011: 190). And why are teens so ‘self’ obsessed? Partly because we expect them to be.

In 1904, psychologist Stanley Hall published two lengthy volumes defining and then describing his unashamedly romantic view of what would subsequently become a distinct and discrete life stage. Adolescence, he declared, was ‘more than puberty’ (Hall, quoted in Savage, 2008: 66). In response to the perceived pressing issue of ‘hoodlumism’, and in a bid to persuade policymakers of the need for extended compulsory education, Hall went on to describe ‘teens’ (in one of the earliest usages of the word) as ‘emotionally unstable and pathic. It is the age of natural inebriation without intoxicants.’ (Hall, quoted in Savage, 2008: 71) He privileged this ‘tingling’, this ‘burning’, this passion, so prevalent in teens, as nothing less than ‘genius’ (Hall, quoted in Spacks, 1981: 234). Those that followed dropped the rose-

biologically determined. For the purposes of this thesis, I adopt Margaret Mead’s definition, which embraces both biological and social terms. Thus, adolescence begins with the onset of puberty, whenever that may fall, and ends with the taking on of the ‘obligations’ or ‘privileges’ of adulthood (Baxter, 2008: 55); a period that roughly spans secondary and tertiary education.

tinted view, instead seizing on his characterisation of this period as so much ‘storm and stress’ or *Sturm und Drang* (a phrase Hall had borrowed from Goethe’s 1774 novel of post-teen torment *The Sorrows of Young Werther*). Chief among these was anthropologist Margaret Mead.

The storm and stress that characterised the American experience was, Mead claimed, no more than the result of the dizzying expanse of choice with which adolescents were faced, and the doctrine of ‘short-cuts to fame’ (Mead, 2001: 164). Like Twenge, Mead saw this shooting for the moon as something to be discouraged, when ‘their education, the part of the country in which they live, the skill with their hands, will combine to dictate choice perhaps between the job of cash girl in a department store or of telephone operator, or of clerk or miner.’ (Mead, 2001: 162)

Mead’s methods and conclusions are clearly at odds with Hall’s, as are their versions and visions of youth, but both works are predicated on the same notion: that adolescence is a ‘problem to be solved’ (Baxter, 2008: 63). Thus, from its very invention by Hall and Mead, this demographic was demonised and distrusted – something to be contained and controlled. In contrast, in the 1960s, Erik Erikson – in terms of identity, as well as more broadly in psychoanalysis – shifted the emphasis from pathology to healthy functioning (Kroger, 2004: 15). Seeing identity formation as ‘recognising and being recognised by those who count’ (Kroger, 2004: 11), he set out a process beginning in childhood with the ‘meeting’ of baby and mother as two distinct persons (Erikson, 1968: 23), going through its ‘normative crisis’ (1968: 23) in adolescence, and continuing to a lesser extent in maturity (1968: 89). But it is this period of ‘normative crisis’ to which he assigns the most importance: ‘In

no other stage of the life cycle [...] are the promise of finding oneself and losing oneself so closely allied.’ (1968: 244) As such, and echoing Hall’s call for ‘repose, leisure, art, legends, romance, idealization’ for these ‘apprentices of life’ (Hall, quoted in Baxter, 2008: 51), Erikson demands for youth a ‘psychological moratorium’.

Defining moratorium as a ‘period of delay granted to somebody who is not ready to meet an obligation’ (Erikson, 1968: 156) – the obligation here being relatively fixed identity, one of the responsibilities of being an adult – he describes a period, akin to Hall’s ‘intoxication’, ‘for horse-stealing and vision-quests, a time for Wanderschaft or work “out West” or “down under”, a time for [...] pranks [...] or delinquency’; a period of ‘provocative playfulness’ on the part of youth and, necessarily, ‘selective permissiveness’ on the part of society (1968: 157). Having begun with newly compelling introspection – the sudden need to ask ‘who am I?’ – the adolescent plays out a series of identifications – with peers and idols; with cliques and crowds – in a period of identity confusion. This is the very period that plays out on the pages of so many young adult novels, including all my own, and the period I wanted to explore again in what would become *Queen Bea*.

It is possible to dismiss this psychological explanation as no more than a cultural construct: we expect storm and stress, we get it; we offer adolescents too many choices, identity crisis is inevitable and a moratorium required. But there is a second explanation, and one I found useful in my justification for the eventual portrayal of narcissism in *Queen Bea*: that teens are self-obsessed because they are wired to be. Neuroscientist Sarah-Jayne Blakemore found that the prefrontal cortex – the region of the brain that is

normally triggered by thoughts about our self – becomes hyperactive during adolescence (Hood, 2001: 68). Another neural account is that the reward centres in the adolescent brain are over-sensitive, meaning rewards are ‘supercharged’ (Hood, 2011: 191) when teens do something right, or well. But, as Hood goes on to point out, ‘it is not enough to succeed. One has to be seen to succeed.’ (2011: 191)

‘Self is multiple and dialogic’ proclaims my notebook from this period of research. ‘We are ALL narcissistic.’

Baggini and Hood had led me to the conclusion I needed on metamorphosis: all the characters would be mutable. Erikson, and Hood’s neuroscientific accounts had helped me find the answer to the question of Stella’s NPD diagnosis: there would not be one. Instead all the characters would be depicted as in need of validation but, crucially, not damningly so. Similarly the internet would be portrayed not as so much fakery, but as another place where self was in Kristeva’s terms ‘playable’, even ‘curatable’.

I had also found my reply to Twenge’s accusation that YA literature was somehow harming teenagers. Given the absence of disease or psychopathology of any kind, given that self-obsession is not just normal, but required, YA had no need retreat into middle-grade territory and pin its hopes on an ersatz Harry Potter. Rather, I believed, it could – indeed should – reveal saturated, narcissistic selves in all their problematic glory, and on a pressing quest to find, define and *redefine* their identity, in concert with others. In addition, I strongly believed it needed to do so in a commercial form.

Writing the novel as part of the doctoral process meant I was freed from the expectation of publishers, but I could not ignore my need to have my message heard by as many readers as possible. Under an academic gaze, however, it had a second purpose: to contribute to new knowledge; I needed to ensure I wasn't merely replicating someone else's work. Chapter 3 discusses my search for YA 'quest for self' novels that have portrayed a mutable and/or multiple self, both to avoid duplication and for ideas of how to present substantial philosophical content in commercial form.

3. Mutable and multiple self in selected YA literature

I knew what I was looking for, or I thought I did. I wanted novels that expressed, explicitly, what Oscar Wilde had articulated in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities.

Such, at any rate, was Dorian Gray's opinion. He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives...
(Wilde, 1994: 164)

I wanted novels that articulated what Virginia Woolf had in short stories like 'The Mark on the Wall', which hopes 'novelists in future' will 'realise more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number...' (Woolf, 1943: 39). Or that achieved, or at least attempted, what she had in *The Waves* (2011). This novel, following six friends from childhood to adulthood, fictionalises Woolf's own conviction that she had many selves. 'The six characters were all supposed to be one,' she wrote to G.L. Dickinson. 'I come to feel more and more how difficult it is to collect myself into one Virginia.' (Woolf, 2011: xxvi). As such it is packed with language that alludes to the dialogic and multiple nature of self. 'How curiously one is changed by the addition [...] of a friend,' remarks Neville. 'As he approaches I become not myself but Neville mixed with somebody.' (2011: 61-62) 'I am not one and simple but complex and many,' says Bernard. 'I have to effect different transitions; have to cover the

entrances and exits of several different men who alternately act their parts as Bernard.’ (2011: 56) These were sentiments I wanted my own characters to articulate.

I wanted novels that introduced me to characters like Anaïs Nin’s Sabina from *A Spy in the House of Love*, (1973) who is ‘certain of myriad lives within herself’ (1973: 39); whose own mutability and dialogism is underscored by her acting aspirations, her double life, her articulated concern that lovers change us, form us into new versions.

So there was ample precedent, I knew, in modernist adult fiction. But was there, I wondered, similar in YA? There should be, I felt. This was, after all, a classification that had been born and come of age within the era of postmodernism. It should, I thought, be replete with joyously mutable and multiple ‘saturated’ selves; fragmented creatures, pastiches of fact and fiction. I was, however, to be left somewhat wanting.

Multiple self in YA fiction

While YA is still relatively young, the number of books published in this age banding now amounts to an average of 30,000 a year in the US.⁸ As such, I could not have hoped within the scope of available time and word count to conduct an exhaustive search or explanation of its entirety. Instead I deliberately limited myself to books identified in significant academic studies as tackling mutable and/or multiple self.

⁸ Source: Blooming Twig quoted at <http://ebookfriendly.com/young-adult-fiction-infographics/> No statistic available for the UK.

As noted, Roberta Seelinger Trites traces YA's roots back to *Bildungsromane*, those coming-of-age novels, aimed at adults, which 'emerged in an atmosphere nurtured by the romantic belief in the individual.' (Seelinger Trites, 2000: 11) Trites quotes Hans Heinrich Borchardt on this genre, which he regards as displaying a 'reasonably direct line from error to truth, from confusion to clarity, from uncertainty to certainty' (2001:11). This, to me, offered an explanation as to the continuing dominance within YA metamorphosis stories, and more specifically within my own work, of narratives that, even while they explore multiplicity, still come back to the comfort of an essential, 'true' self.

Robyn McCallum's 1999 monograph *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction* backs this theory further, arguing that mainstream 'adolescent fiction has been dominated by premodern conceptions of the individual, the self, and the child associated with liberal humanism and romanticism' (McCallum, 1999: 3-4). McCallum goes on to associate this dominant liberal humanist ethic with the privileging of 'concepts such as the uniqueness of the individual and the essentiality of self, as opposed to the self as fragmented or plural.' (1999: 67) But for McCallum this is no more than a starting point; the central premise of the piece is that there are exceptions within adolescent literature that reveal subjectivity to be constructed dialogically. She goes on to use Bakhtinian theories of dialogism to examine those exceptional YA novels that 'implicitly problematize' (1999: 67) humanist conceptions of subjectivity, by either:

- a) representing subjectivity as dialogically constructed, via the use of doubles, which represent the intersubjective relationships between self and other; or temporal, cultural or psychological displacement
- b) using overtly dialogical narrative strategies, such as intertextuality, or epistolary form.

Falling under the first heading are novels such as: Peter Dickinson's *Eva* (2001), which postulates a futuristic world in which the brain patterns and memory of a dying girl are transplanted into the brain of a chimpanzee, who then finds her identity split between human and ape; *Speaking to Miranda* by Caroline MacDonald (1991), which exploits and explores both doubling and Dissociative Identity Disorder in a story about a teenager investigating the death of a mother she never knew; and Penelope Farmer's *Charlotte Sometimes* (1987) (arguably a middle grade novel), whose time-slip plot between the 1960s and 1918 sees the 'modern' Charlotte become 'Clare', resulting in Charlotte's feeling of confusion and split self.

McCallum's insight on these and other novels was fascinating to me. But on close reading of her primary sources, it seemed evident that, while they do investigate dialogical construction – as do my *Wonderland*, *Undertow* and *Eden* – the resulting fragmentation of self is ultimately portrayed as a negative. 'What would happen if people did not recognise you? Would you know who you were yourself?' muses Charlotte, invoking the dialogism I was seeking. 'Were you some particular person only because people recognised you as that?' (Farmer, 1987: 65) But her thoughts are 'uncomfortable', and turn swiftly to anxiety and anger as she dreams she is 'fighting to stay as

Charlotte' (1987: 109). 'I'm Clare, I'm Clare. No I'm not. I'm Charlotte, I'm Charlotte,' she screams. (1987: 123)

Moreover, these books fell within my understanding of gothic, fantasy or science fiction, or, again like my own *Wonderland*, *Undertow* and *Eden*, fell back on a diagnosis of psychopathology. None of them were celebrations of multiple self as a normative state, or contemporary portrayals of self as necessarily mutable. And the harder and wider I searched for YA novels that dealt with dialogism, the more I found them failing on my terms. Em Bailey's *Shift* (2012) is a metamorphosis tale in the Pygmalion vein, and one that shared not only premise but also setting and smart-talking with my intended piece. But, while admirable and gripping, *Shift* problematises multiple self, pathologising troubled protagonist Olive's imaginary friend Ami, as well as falling back on gothic horror through her belief that the manipulative Miranda is a 'shapeshifter'. A similarly manipulative (and inevitably troubled) adversary appears in Anne Fine's *The Tulip Touch* (1997), in which protagonist Natalie is portrayed as being led astray by troublemaker Tulip; the suggestion being that Tulip depletes or corrals Natalie's 'true' self.

But if I couldn't find an equivalent in content, I wondered if I could find one in terms of form. McCallum had also looked to intertextuality and the epistolary to offer answers, turning up *The Hillingdon Fox* (Mark, 1993), whose diary format she sees as 'the simultaneous construction of a narrated or represented self and a narrating voice' (1999: 215); in other words: the self as story, and, by implication, mutable. For other examples I turned to academic Karen Coats, whose entry on 'Young Adult Literature' in the *Handbook of*

Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature (Coats, 2011) had led me to McCallum in the first place.

Here, Coats cites the titular character from the graphic novel *Making Up Megaboy* (Walter and Roeckelein, 1998) as 'the decentred subject of postmodern discourse par excellence'. (Coats, 2011: 318) Taking a trope similar to the one used in Woolf's own *Jacob's Room*, we see Megaboy purely through the eyes and descriptions of those with whom he has come into contact. As Coats puts it: 'He never speaks for himself, and those who speak for him know startlingly little about him.' (2011: 318) As a result we see a host of different Megaboys, all potentially false, all potentially true.

For several months, I toyed with this as a potential form – the revelation to the reader of Stella's many selves using only others' descriptions, via interview transcript, social media update and blog post. But this, I realised, would rule out a first-person narrator, and as such the character of Bea as a protagonist. It was also, I felt, an ill-fitting coat for a 'quest for self' story, which centres on the 'I', as well as being insufficiently commercial. I wanted my work to take the form of a classic metamorphosis story, to lure readers in with that same promise of a better self, or a single, 'true' self, and then to subvert it. And, returning to McCallum's examples, I decidedly did *not* want it to contain elements of gothic, fantasy or science fiction, or a diagnosis of psychopathology, which I believed immediately undermined the suggestion of self as mutable and multiple. It was at this point I found myself turning once again to the American author David Levithan.

Mutable and Multiple Self in David Levithan's *Every Day*

I was already intending to lift the language of Levithan, translating his quickfire New York and New Jersey dialogue into a more British patter, and putting it into the mouths of an over-educated Oxford adolescent elite. He had also offered inspiration in the character Infinite Darlene from *Boy Meets Boy* (2006), the drag queen quarterback, whose dialogism, as well as positive narcissism, is a matter of record:

She seems very full of herself. Which she *is*. It's only after you get to know her better that you realize that somehow she's managed to encompass all her friends within her own self-image, so that when she's acting full of herself, she's actually full of her close friends, too. (Levithan, 2006: 54-55)

Darlene later appears cloned and magnified in the enormous form of Tiny Cooper in Levithan's work with John Green *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* (Green and Levithan, 2010), its very title suggesting doubling and identity confusion. However, I believed it would be his 2012 novel *Every Day* that most clearly explored the nature of self, metamorphosis, and the implications of mutability. As such, I opened this book with the unbounded optimism of a devoted fan, and, I assumed, fellow believer in multiplicity, expecting to unearth the golden standard of all I was trying to achieve with *Queen Bea*. What I found inside the pages was a very different story.

Every Day hangs on a clever conceit: that genderless protagonist 'A' wakes up in the body of a different sixteen-year-old every day. Retaining only facts, not feelings, A inhabits that life for twenty-four hours, carefully

avoiding altering its course, until s/he wakes up in the body of monosyllabic, self-centred Justin and falls in love with his girlfriend Rhiannon.

This is the metamorphosis novel taken to a new level, each incarnation introducing us to an entirely new way of being. And as A explores these different lives, as readers we are invited to do the same. As each new embodiment takes its turn as protagonist, we empathise with them, developing an understanding of their difference, but also better able to see ‘other’ as not so far from our own lives. We meet – and, by dint of identifying with A, become – gay teenagers, transgender teenagers, gender fluid teenagers, obese teenagers; black, white, Asian. We see the world through the eyes of emos, beauty queens, geeks and jocks. Or rather, through A, who, like an internal pair of x-ray glasses, views the world through their eyes for us:

But when who you are changes every day – you get to touch the universal more. Even the most mundane details. You see how cherries taste different to different people. Blue looks different. You see all the strange rituals boys have to show affection without admitting it. [...] By seeing the world from so many angles, you get more of a sense of its dimensionality.
(Levithan, 2012: 123)

At a basic level, these metamorphoses worked for me. The fact that these were all ‘real people’ that A had become meant accusations of fraud were more problematic than the ones leveled at Jay Gatsby or Jake Garrett. And yet the reality drive – the need to uncover counterfeit – still kicked in as I longed for Rhiannon to realise the deceit, and reveled when it was revealed. Then, as I began to look for evidence of dialogic, multiple self within the text, I found a degree of confusion.

In one sense, A is pure self. Unencumbered by a body, family, friends or memory beyond basic life skills, s/he theoretically avoids the range of external influences that help shape us, and yet A is not devoid of character. Even though I found it easy to ignore the psychological impossibility of this, it remained problematic, asserting as it did an essentiality of self. A did not alter with each new metamorphosis; the new body s/he wore and the life s/he inhabited were no more than vestments. Thus A is actually the inverse of Megaboy's 'decentred subject of postmodern discourse par excellence'. S/he is entirely centred, and singular. And, it transpires, there is a reason for this.

In an interview with the author, conducted by email, he compared these changes of body to the idea of moving house. 'I think if you moved to a different house every week of your life, you would still have a notion of "home",' he says (See Appendix 2 for full transcript). For him, while he admits that 'you can't really write YA without thinking about identity', the novel was not about self in these terms, but its packaging. 'I think the driving force was thinking about how we are defined by our bodies, and what it would take to transcend that definition.' So the novel, then, was not intended to investigate self as a concept.

For Levithan, self is singular and, more than that, an ideal self is more or less unchanging. 'I believe you are always the essentially the same person,' he told me, 'just doing different things, as opposed to being separate people and personalities within a single body.' He goes on to invoke the idea of 'finding oneself' and 'knowing oneself' as a force to combat negative external influence: 'If you have a strong sense of who you are, that will counterbalance any other people's sense of who you are. But if you don't know who you are,

then you can be overly influenced by other people's perceptions of you.' This plays out in the character of Vic, who is biologically female and gendered male:

[W]hen Dawn looked at Vic, she saw Vic exactly as he wanted to be seen. Whereas Vic's parents couldn't help seeing who he used to be, and so many friends and strangers couldn't help seeing who he didn't want to be anymore, Dawn only saw him. Call it a blur if you want, but Dawn didn't see a blur. She saw a very distinct, clear person. (Levithan, 2012: 296)

While this acceptance appealed to me, and while I found the novel's controlling idea – that we shouldn't let the exterior define the interior – admirable, it also rankled and rang false, asserting the irrelevance of appearance, in particular to sexual attraction and love. In its favour, the novel admits what I see as its own central flaw, because while A attempts to persuade Rhiannon of the old adage that 'it's what inside that counts', twice Rhiannon points out the absurdity of this argument: 'Yes you're the same person inside. But the outside matters too' she tells A (2012: 151). Later, A urges her 'Don't look at the package. Look at what's inside.' 'That's easy for you to say,' she counters. 'I never change, do I?' (2012: 316)

These exchanges read to me as Levithan realising the impossibility of his own idealism – a point he later admitted to me was the case: 'I didn't know the ending until three-quarters of the way through the book, and reconciling the love story with the situation was certainly the part that stymied me. If only I'd written a fable – then I could have bent reality to fit the ideal. But reality asserted itself.'

And so, what I had embarked on with high hopes ended with my own reluctant acceptance that *Every Day* aligned with McCallum's assessment of mainstream YA by asserting an essential self, as well as falling under both the genres I had hoped to avoid, using, as it did, elements of both gothic and science fiction in its implausible plotline and conceit. And yet I remained optimistic for my own work.

Firstly, Levithan hadn't set out to do the same as me – we thought and worked very differently – so there was no reason I could not achieve where I felt he had not. My disappointment also suggested that what I intended to do would indeed break new ground in YA literature in terms of content. And, overwhelmingly, though my extensive reading had failed to unearth a clear YA precedent, it had revealed enough gems and germs of ideas in Woolf, Wilde and Nin to inspire – their texts littered with explicit references to self-as-process, devices implicitly suggesting multiplicity, characters wildly and desirably (though not unproblematically) narcissistic.

And so I took these seeds, along with my own post-Mackie convictions on self, and began to use them to shape *Queen Bea* into what I hoped would become an uncompromising portrayal of mutable and multiple self. Rather than relying on the tropes of science fiction, fantasy or gothic horror, or resort to a diagnosis of ill mental health, I would celebrate dialogism and multiplicity. In so doing I hoped I might absolve not only my intended readers of the accusation of narcissism, but myself, too.

4. Mutable, multiple self and self-obsession in *Queen Bea*

While it is clear from the opening blog post that *Queen Bea* takes a markedly different form from my previous works, the early part of its narrative echoes both *Wonderland* and *Eden*. It establishes Bea, like Jude and Evie before her, as a ‘nobody’, an ugly duckling ripe for transformation; establishes Stella as the model for her later incarnation; and establishes Bea’s parents, her best friend Byron, and former best friend Nell act as antagonists. As in both previous novels, the metamorphosis is completed over a mere few weeks, in this case at the end of Bea’s first year of sixth form at a private school in Oxford, during the run-up to school elections for Head Boy and Head Girl. Again, as in both previous novels, this transformation includes mirror scenes and costume changes, with Bea emerging in her swan-form as a deliberate double of her idol. It is not until the third act of the novel that *Queen Bea* exhibits a clear narrative departure.

Unlike her predecessors, at the novel’s climax, Bea refuses to heed the implicit call to ‘be herself’. Instead of rejecting Stella – her maker – as a false god, Bea attempts to redeem her, and justify her own decision to retain her new form, as well as take on further incarnations. While she does return to her friendship with Byron, this is only possible through his acceptance of her new form, rather than through her own self-acceptance. This is her ‘new normal’, but hers alone, as the landscape and relationships around her remain largely unaltered by events. While Nell fails in her mission to be crowned Head Girl, she still ‘reigns over the common room’, and there is no real resolution of the dominance of the ‘Plastics’, with Dawse slipping easily into Nell’s place. And

as a new term starts, the final word goes to Byron's 'Bell Jar' blog, which, instead of acknowledging a changed regime at Bellingham, merely reblogs its earlier offer to publish every scrap of scandal. So the drive to expose 'truth', the demand for 'authenticity' remains, as it does in the world around me. But Bea, like me, understands that this is a fallacy, and can go into her life beyond this confines of the novel living out her 'selves'.

So Bea's journey is a reflection of my own process of 'self-discovery' in writing the novel, but the evidence of this goes far beyond narrative, with clues to its origins and influences woven into character, structure and dialogue.

The first line of the first page of my first notebook for the new novel, under the headline 'FOCUS MORE', lists: 'Gatsby quality'. This was the starting point for *Book of Bad*'s metamorphosis into *Queen Bea*, and, while I was determined to alter the ending, I attempted to include some vestiges of this metamorphosis tale: Stella is intended as 'Gatsby and Daisy rolled into one' (notebook); Bea, my narrator, not an impartial Nick Carraway or Rick Paradis, but another Garrett/Gatsby dazzled by the promise of change; while the debauched Bellingham parties are an homage to the ones described by Fitzgerald and Korman. These are a clue to the novel's original incarnation, but no more than a starting point. The rest of the work takes as its cue the mutable, multiple self I found through Mackie, and the necessary self-obsession I saw in its wake. It plucks devices from Woolf, Wilde and Nin, amongst others, while characters parrot lines from teen films and TV series.

Below, I illustrate how a selection of the key ideas are woven into the final text of the novel, separating these out under the broad banners of ‘mutable and multiple self’ and ‘normative narcissism’, though some, inevitably, span both categories.

Self is mutable and multiple

Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities.

Such, at any rate, was Dorian Gray’s opinion. He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives...
(Wilde, 1994: 164)

Following a dedication ‘to the nobodies’ – a dig at Greenfield’s dismissal of this generation of adolescents, as well as nod to Bea and myself, who saw ourselves as just that – the Wilde epigraph sets the scene for the novel. Dorian Gray is both narcissist and chameleon, as well as an alter for his author, Oscar Wilde. But Wilde’s justification for Gray in this passage renders him sympathetic, and a model, albeit a surprising one, for both Bea and Stella. In addition, this direct expression of a character’s (and author’s) philosophical belief is mimicked throughout *Queen Bea*. There is Bea’s early essay answering the question ‘Who am I?’ with neuroscience gleaned from her father’s *Lancet* and *New Scientist*:

I am a clever conceit, they think. A trick of the ego to convince my poor, pathetic human head and heart that I matter. And so they conspire, working together to recognise faces, keep hold of memories, make plans.

But it's all an illusion, a sleight of hand.
 If you took me apart you'd find nothing there. There is no pearl
 of Bea-ness buried within me, hidden in some crevice or sacred cave.
 There is no eternal soul. There is nothing but muscle and blood and
 bundles of nerves.
 (*Queen Bea*, essay in Prologue⁹)

Later Stella acknowledges the role of fictional characters and celebrities in
 dialogic self, directly quoting, and then acknowledging a fictional antecedent
 from Nik Cohn's *I Am Still The Greatest Says Johnny Angelo* (1990):

I am all the things I've done and the ones I'm yet to think of.
 I am memories and hopes and other people's dreams.
 I am who I want to be. And who they make me.
 I am my mother's daughter and Woolf's and Wilde's.
 I am all things at once, all heroes and all villains.
 I am Johnny Angelo and Jimmy Dean.
 I am Marilyn and Marlene and the girl next door.
 I am the Wicked Witch of the West and Glinda and Dorothy too.
 (Stella in *Queen Bea*, essay following Chapter One)

This absorption of fiction into self (as well as the implication of multiple self)
 is echoed in Bea's description of the many 'selves' she dreams of being (all,
 significantly, identities I have toyed with):

I wanted – want – to be the girl someone writes about. The girl in the
 song or the film. Or girls. Because there's not just one. I want to be
 Velvet Brown winning the Grand National disguised as a boy. I want to be
 George in the Famous Five solving mysteries no adult could
 possibly understand. I want to be Andy in *Pretty in Pink* defying the
 rules of school and James Spader, and landing the boy from the right
 side of tracks; Baby in *Dirty Dancing* saving the world and getting to
 dance a merengue with Patrick Swayze sweating in a vest; Gabriella
 the geek who wins the scholastic marathon, the lead in the high school
 musical and Zac Efron's heart in one tear-jerking, heart-soaring hat
 trick.

⁹ All quotes from *Queen Bea* are Bea's words, unless otherwise indicated.

(*Queen Bea*, Chapter Ten)

Bea also acknowledges the well-worn tropes of teen films and YA, which we use to imagine our own narratives:

I am the kind of kid who should be writing a comic book superhero version of me called Geek Girl, who fights crime and injustice using only her freakish ability to recite Keats or sight-read Beethoven. And some boy, some cool kid, some Heathcliff, or Hunter, would discover it and realise I had inner depths if not secret powers.
(*Queen Bea*, Chapter Two)

This pastiche formation of self is further implied by the namedropping of actors, musicians or fictional creations – ‘You are Batman and the Joker rolled into one. You are my Christian Slater as JD ticket out of obscurity’ Bea says of Stella in the opening chapter – as well as by the use of lines from teen films and TV series: ‘Hating her because she’s rich is as bad as her hating us because we’re not,’ says Bea, ‘invoking the god of dialogue that is John Hughes’ as she quotes his film *Pretty in Pink* (2003) (*Queen Bea*, Chapter Three). Elsewhere stolen lines go uncredited: ‘If you’re nice I’ll let you buy me a Slushie,’ Bea tells Dexter in Chapter Sixteen, playing Winona Ryder as Veronica in the teen film *Heathers* (2005). Where we used to inherit speech patterns from parents and peers, now digital media mean our sources are almost infinite.

While this knowing language peppers the pages of the novel, metamorphosis is, of course, at its heart, with Bea reflecting the teenage me, obsessed over the possibility offered by the TV makeover:

Of all the lessons in life the small screen has served up like crack and candy, the biggest and best is that there is no power greater than the ability to give good makeover.

I once devoted an entire weekend to watching reruns of the lank-haired and slack-stomached get bobbed and beauty balmed into swans. A misspent youth? Not if I pull it off one day. And I've tried. Oh, how I've tried, on an almost yearly basis.
(*Queen Bea*, Chapter Eight)

Bea mimics these transformations using scissors, falsies and fake tan. But all attempts are met with the same derision mine were: a double-assault of 'You look ridiculous,' and 'It's just not *you*, Beatrice.' (*Queen Bea*, Chapter Eight)

The novel allows us to imagine these past attempts at escaping her chrysalis, but also offers the 'live' version, including a 'mirror moment' as Stella helps her dye and cut her hair. This is intended to emphasise the importance of surface in the creation and consideration of self, while Stella's insistence that she needs to take it further suggests all self is a construct: 'You can't just paint your nails and put your hair up,' Stella tells Bea. 'You've got to practise. You've got to play the part.' (*Queen Bea*, Chapter Eight)

Crucially, though, the result is not simple metamorphosis into a unique new being, but rather complicated by mimicry. This is 'doubling', a device I have used previously and extensively to investigate ideas of identity: In *Wonderland*, Jude has an alter in Stella, but her metamorphosis transforms her physically into both Stella and her own mother, revealing that Stella is her mother's double as well as her own. In *Eden*, Bea and Evie are described as 'paper dolls', and Evie is mistaken for, and then tries to become, Bea; while James and Penn we are told resemble each other, James later taking on his identity in full. In *Undertow*, Billie is mistaken for her mother; Danny for his uncle.

And here, in an echo of *Wonderland* and *Eden*, Bea becomes Stella, whom she will later discover is her half sister:

And I do look. And I do see. I see the way our eye colour seems to match now that my hair matches yours, my dull brown more hazel in the reflected glory. I see that my pale skin is almost your porcelain but for the persistent, insistent freckles that spatter paint my nose. I see that I am a blank canvas, painted with primer and potential, ready to be transformed into a pretty-as-a-picture technicolour version of myself. (*Queen Bea*, Chapter Eight)

And this transformation is everywhere: Nell has dramatically altered her body and thus self-image through diet; her father is a plastic surgeon – a nod to both transformation of self and narcissism; and acting is key. The latter is a device I have employed previously as a metaphor for the trying on of new selves (something I experienced with three years at drama school, a career choice made purely for its potential to transform me). Here, Stella's mother Pearl is an actress. Taking her cue from Dorian Gray's actress-girlfriend Sybil Vane, as well as Sabina from Nin's *A Spy in the House of Love*, bohemian Pearl is already not 'her self':

You think she's authentic? Her real name's Jean Gilhoolie. She grew up on a council estate in Clacton and she's just lucky her dad's dead and her mum's Alzheimic so no one's around to remind her who she really is on a regular basis. (Stella in *Queen Bea*, Chapter Six)

This is a 'truth' that is later authenticated by the inclusion of Pearl's/Jean's birth certificate. The metamorphosis is then further muddled by Pearl's own

confusion between the roles she has played on stage and screen, and real events:

‘I tried to kill myself once you know,’ she says. ‘Aspirin and vodka.’
 ‘That was a film,’ you say, and sweep her debris into the bin.
 (*Queen Bea*, Chapter Fourteen)

I have deliberately left it unclear as to whether this is mistake or intent on Pearl’s part. In addition, it is a trait that, along with dieting and plastic surgery, I refuse to condemn or condone. This is the world as Twenge and Greenfield see it. My counter is not to paint a new, idealised landscape, but to show that it can be interpreted differently, through the eyes of Bea.

The potential negatives of proliferation of gossip, and self-as-defined-by-other are also ever-present. Byron’s blog opens, closes and intersperses the story – a digital *Tatler*. Other intertextual material adds to this effect, with social media statuses revealing their writers’ opinions of others (whilst also revealing their own narrated ‘self’). While, in a nod to *Making Up Megaboy*, Bea acknowledges that the Stella she knows is composed of only five ‘facts’:

1. That you are an only child.
 2. That your mother is an on-the-verge-of-fading film star called Pearl Finn, who once played opposite Redford, but now pays for the upkeep of her house and face through soap operas and skincare commercials and a yearly run in rundown-beach-resort rep.
 3. That your father is probably the then-married and now-dead actor with whom she had an on-set fling; an affair that lasted fewer weeks than the film managed in the box office ratings. Although a dalliance with a Tory politician has never been entirely ruled out.
 4. That you’ve been through four schools in five years, but still managed to come away with a government-approved number of A*s and no discernible drug habit.
 5. That you are allergic to peanuts.
- (*Queen Bea*, Chapter Two)

Bea goes on to elaborate:

The rest is conjecture and rumour and wishful thinking. Hunches plucked out of thin air and a *Heat* magazine habit and Chinese-whispered into possibility. That you've slept with the heroin-high son of pop star. That you only drink green tea and vodka. That, once, in a boarding school dorm, you kissed a girl and liked it. The first is unlikely, the second I already know is a lie, and the third, who cares. Except, of course, we all do.
(*Queen Bea*, Chapter Two)

Bea, in contrast, is not talked about at all. As such, she does not exist; she is, as she points out 'a nobody'. This is a point that is further emphasised in the contrast between the girls' bedrooms. Bea's 'magnolia walls bear only the obligatory Che poster and one sheet of lyrics Byron has typed up on his old Olympic, so my magnolia existence is set out for all to see.' Whereas Stella's is cluttered, chaotic; full of life, and lives:

I can barely see the deep red of the wallpaper under the layers of life that adorn it. Every surface is covered with postcards, printouts, handwritten notes. There are tiny pink slips that have been passed in class and pages of what look like poetry – the sloping italics sparse and centred – but which I now know are lists, of books and boys and songs to be found. A bookcase heaves under the weight of Kant and Keats, a coterie of Barbies and a magic eight-ball. And from its uppermost shelf an understuffed and overloved toy monkey surveys it all through a single glass eye. Sees me, awkward in the doorway. And sees, nestled below him like Venus in an oyster shell, like a perfect iridescent pearl, you.
(*Queen Bea*, Chapter Five)

This use of 'you' is also significant. Originally I had assumed the novel would mimic my previous YA and middle grade novels, taking first person voice as

a way to immerse myself in Bea. But, while the novel ostensibly reads in this way – Bea’s ‘I’ leading us through the story – she is addressing all thoughts to a ‘you’: Stella. The decision to use second person was a deliberate device to invoke dialogism, as it implicates Stella in Bea’s story, as well as in her ‘self’, whilst, perhaps subconsciously, inviting the reader to imagine themselves as the addressed: a further hint at dialogism.

The possibility proffered by mutable and multiple self runs through *Queen Bea*, spoken out loud by its characters, evident in its devices, suggested by its form. Self-obsession is no less apparent, implicit in some of the textual examples given above, and explicit in those set out below.

Narcissism is necessary and normative

Because what’s the point in doing anything if you can’t Instagram it or reduce it to 140 characters, right, Nell? You walking talking Generation Me doll.
(*Queen Bea*, Chapter Eleven)

As Bea declares here in her assessment of Nell, this is the selfie generation, and narcissism colours every chapter of *Queen Bea*, every character: surface is privileged over depth and those who are found wanting are named and shamed; make-up matters; social media updates reveal the need for constant and prolific self-validation, while barely a moment passes that isn’t Instagrammed. It is, as Twenge would argue, a veritable epidemic, and this negativity is implied through Bea and Byron’s derision of the ‘Plastics’ (named for the clique of the same name in the film *Mean Girls* (2002); through the vanity of Pearl and Nell who have transformed their bodies to

become ‘better’ selves; and through Nell’s father who carries out the transformations. Byron’s role in the text is deliberately as a stand-in Twenge / Greenfield, imbued with golden-age thinking and viewing the scene he surveys in his ‘everything is awful’ glasses. His blog derides his fellow students:

No, high school is where it really starts. A battlefield in ballet flats; an Edith Wharton world in which conspicuousness passes for distinction, and the wrong shoes can buy you a ticket to seven years of, at best, obscurity, and, at worst, daily humiliation. A decision as seemingly simple as where you sit in the refectory can dictate your social ranking for your entire scholastic life. Sure your stock might rise with a new haircut or if you suck Dexter Wilton’s dick behind the bike sheds. But, believe me, you are the sum of dumbest utterings, your skankiest outfits, and your least flattering profile pictures.
(*Queen Bea*, ‘The Bell Jar’ blog in Prologue and Epilogue)

But, as he goes on to say, ‘hey, The Bell Jar will publish them all’, thus feeding the very narcissism he dismisses.

Crucially, his own self-image – the boy who doesn’t care about labels, who sneers at Hunter for carrying Kerouac in his back pocket so everyone can see – is as carefully calculated as Nell’s calorie-counted version of herself, as Bea points out:

‘[Y]ou’re so fucking busy channeling Ginsberg or whoever you wouldn’t know. All this, ‘authenticity’ thing is for shit. Don’t you get it? There is no authenticity anymore. We don’t live in vacuum-sealed aspic, or— or under a Bell Jar. Everything is a replay of a replay. Everyone wears their influences on their sleeve and no one gives a shit, or at least they shouldn’t. You think acting like you’re Oscar Wilde makes you more authentic than, I don’t know, that Asian kid with the Harry Styles haircut? You think it makes you better than him? Well, newsflash, it doesn’t.’
(*Queen Bea*, Chapter Twelve)

This is the point Bea reiterates in her closing words on the pliability of identity:

We all rewrite our lives, drop scenes, tweak lines and lighting to suit our audience and the version of ourselves we want to play that day or month or year. We're all constructs, characters, when you look at it like that.

(*Queen Bea*, Chapter Twenty-four)

So for Bea (as it is for me), this narcissism and fakery is a historical and universal trait, and not one to get exorcised about, because, just as multiplicity does not mean erasure of self, a lack of supposed authenticity does not lead to an inevitable erasure of truth. As Bea tells Stella:

'Be yourself,' they all say. 'Be yourself and the world will love you.' Only life isn't a Hallmark card, and besides, which me? Because, of everything you have taught me – how to perfect liquid eyeliner, how to look like I give not a fuck when I'm peeing my pants, how to walk the walk and talk the talk – the real pearl is that none of us are ourselves. Or at least not the ones we think we are. We are more.

(*Queen Bea*, Chapter Twenty-four)

And with this subversion of the opening of *Wonderland*, the novel's premise, purpose, and, crucially, difference is articulated clearly. A difference that is set out structurally at the start, reiterated throughout via text and trope, and expressed explicitly in the final few pages. Acting as a closing parenthesis to the Wilde quote, Bea ends her address to Stella by repeating the novel's controlling idea of positive dialogic self, mirroring Stella's own words from her earlier essay:

[Y]ou were right:
I am all the things I've done and the ones I'm yet to think of.
I am memories and hopes and other people's dreams.
I am who I want to be. And who they make me.
And who you made me, too.
And for that I will be forever grateful.
(*Queen Bea*, Chapter Twenty-four)

Bea is not a nobody as she initially claims, devoid of self, she is somebody, and she is everybody. By moulding and multiplying herself she hasn't erased her being, but become more adaptive, become 'more'. By gaining confidence in her character(s), and acknowledging their dual authorship, she displays the kind of expansive narcissism I so admired in Levithan's character Infinite Darlene.

And by writing her, I believe, I hope, I have too.

Conclusion

The best novels chart the growth of their protagonist(s); the change in self they experience as a result of their journey. Within the YA banding this is often the literal storyline as they chart the very process of ‘growing up’, with metamorphosis stories explicit metaphors for this. But the process of ‘growing up’ is changing. We no longer (if we ever did) jump from the fields of rye into a single identity, but into a multiplicity of selves, and these continue to adapt, to change, to proliferate throughout our adult lives. Thus it seems to me that the quest-for-self novel must undergo metamorphosis too, dropping its demands that we return to the self that genetics or circumstance have set out for us, or indeed that we settle on a single, ‘true’ self at all.

Queen Bea is a changed creature from the book I set out to write, and from all the YA novels I have written before in content, form and style. It is also, I believe, unique in its genre in its content and controlling idea. It refuses to take the form of gothic, fantasy or science fiction. It does not resort to psychopathology to explain away Bea’s urge to metamorphose. But nor does it over-idealise the world it represents. On a professional level it achieves all I hoped, at least in the drafting stage: it shows narcissism as normative and necessary; it encourages the trying on of new selves; it tells its prospective readers that they do not have to be the self they are ascribed by parents or others, although what others think certainly plays its part. As such I believe it is a valid argument against both Greenfield’s ‘nobodies’ and Twenge’s ‘narcissism epidemic’ and, contrary to Twenge’s demands for a return to

societal-focused novels for teens, it asserts self as a valid subject for YA literature.

Does this matter? And, crucially, does this matter to my adolescent readers? Julian Baggini, on whose writing much of the philosophy in the book was based, believes it does:

You can get trapped in stuff. When you get to the end of your first year at secondary school, generally speaking you'll be pigeonholed in certain ways by your peers and often you don't get a chance to break out of that until you go to university or you change school at sixth form. It's a straitjacket, almost. People feel other kids won't let them change. If you turn up one day with a completely different image you'll get the piss taken out of you. But knowing it's possible is liberating, I suppose.

(Julian Baggini, interview with Joanna Nadin, Bristol, 29 June 2015)

But all this hope of inspiring experimentation is hypothetical, of course, until the book is sold.

The novel was submitted first to Walker, and Little, Brown, who publish some of my YA and middle grade novels respectively. Both turned it down. Karen Ball at Little, Brown said it was too 'edgy' for their list. Lucy Earley at Walker cited concerns over the language and behaviour of the cast of characters. In an email to my agent dated 29 June 2015¹⁰, Earley said she 'struggled with the tone of the book and the shallow nature of the three lead characters – Bea, Stella and Byron' and that they would need to have 'more humanity, warmth and appeal' with Bea in particular needing 'occasional redeeming traits/flashes of humour and humanity'. She also 'struggled with

¹⁰ For personal reasons, this email is not reproduced in full or further referenced.

the snarky tone of language and dialogue and the heavy stylistics in places’ and ‘found the aggressive language and outlook of the characters overdone’.

From this, and a later rejection from Bloomsbury, it is clear that my refusal to idealise the world I was portraying, or to condemn Bea’s or others’ actions, are proving to be, as my agent puts it, ‘a hard sell’. However, she believes it is not an impossible one, and the novel will be resubmitted in late 2016 or early 2017 by which time she believes the UK market may be more ready for such an ‘uncompromising’ look at late adolescence. If this proves unsuccessful then I realise I am faced with a choice: to compromise on language and content, or to look at new markets and audiences: the United States, which has a thriving upper-end YA market, or the UK adult market.

In the meantime, a subsequent work *Everybody Hurts* – co-written with award-winning YA author Anthony McGowan, and acquired by Hachette in the UK – is evidence that *Queen Bea* has a life beyond its 41,000 words, and beyond the scope of this doctoral process. The language of *Everybody Hurts* is the same mix of smarts and pop culture references that pepper *Queen Bea*, while its female protagonist Sophia (whose side of the story I was responsible for) has absorbed much of Bea’s bravado and daring. And an adult novel, *The Queen of Bloody Everything* – which takes from *Queen Bea* the concept of self created from fictions, second person voice, and a version of Pearl as protagonist and addressee – has been bought by Macmillan for publication in Spring 2018.

In addition, and crucially, I am avowed never to exhort any character to be their ‘true self’ again, or at least not without a comeback that suggests this as an impossibility, or to portray a metamorphosis that will later be

dismissed as so much fakery. I will continue to expand my reading and thinking on this, to extol the virtues of multiplicity, to encourage my readers to play with identity, to encourage my creative writing students to think about the mutability of identity in adolescence and how that might be portrayed on the page. As these examples make clear, metamorphosis has been at the heart of the novel, and the doctoral process itself, transforming my thinking, and thus my work as a writer. But it is on a personal level that its effects have been felt most profoundly.

The morning goes like this:

I reach across the vacant space in my double bed, check my iPhone or iPad for Facebook notifications: Who has messaged Me? Who has tagged Me? More importantly, who has 'liked' Me? I post a status update about Me. I flick to Twitter to over-share my waking thoughts, because everyone needs to hear what *I* have to say. I flick back, change my profile picture to one that better shows off my hard-won low weight, better reflects the positive Me I am today – a selfie signing books at Hay. Famous Me! Successful Me!

Look at Me!

I pull on a dress that reveals my surgically altered cleavage. I coat my hair in products that tame my grandmother's curls; I paint on concealer that hides my grandfather's dark circles, mascara that promises the look of fake lashes while proclaiming on its packaging 'They're Real', blusher that suggests I may just be in post-coital flush. And all the while I gaze at my reflection in one of the too-many mirrors that adorn my bedroom walls, or the oh-so-convenient cameras on my iPhone, iPad, iMac.

Do I sound vain? Self-obsessed? Shallow?

Yes.

Do I feel guilty? Ashamed? Adolescent?

No.

Because self is a valid obsession and, while it may be narcissistic, it isn't solipsistic. My self requires an other, not to tell me I matter and to make me feel better, but to exist at all, both in 'real life', and on the page. My writing is an exploration of my selves, but it requires an audience if only to justify publication and provide pay cheques. This dialogism is reflected in the reading process too – again, a narcissistic one, but again decidedly not solipsistic. As we read, we identify with, even inhabit, characters; we try out new lives for size – particularly as children and teenagers. Writing in the first person, as I do, extends this explicitly as I live out my own creations, borrowing words from them as easily and unselfconsciously as I put them in their mouths.

The journey ends where it began – with Emily Mackie.

In Search of Solace – the novel Mackie was in the early draft stages of when we first met – was published by Sceptre in August 2014, just days before I began my draft of *Queen Bea*. I bought a copy and kept it on my desk – a talisman, but an unopened one; its pages pristine, at least until my own work was done, half scared as I was that I would be disappointed, half that I might be tempted to steal.

When I finally began to read, though, my reaction was one of both relief and joy. Here, I felt, was a book that not only attempted but achieved in

adult literary fiction what I was trying to do in commercial YA. Plot and language hung heavy with the same philosophy and neuroscience – taken from Baggini and Hood, amongst others – but not distractingly so. Instead, passages like, ‘I am defined by my past but also the possibilities of my future. But all said and done, it seems I only exist because you say I do,’ (2014: 154) dripped higher purpose into proceedings, allowing me to consider my own selves as I witnessed protagonist Jacob play out his seventeen incarnations. The similarities did not end there.

Mackie’s novel opens with an epigraph – Walt Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’, the same poem Stella quotes early in *Queen Bea*: ‘I contain multitudes,’ she writes, ‘Isn’t that how the poem goes?’ (*Queen Bea*) In turn, the same line is later repeated by Jacob: ‘There is no *one* in me at all. Can’t you see? I am large. I contain multitudes.’ (Mackie, 2014: 117)

As in *Queen Bea* (and its antecedents *The Great Gatsby* and *Jake, Reinvented*) others accuse Jacob of charlatanism, but, like Bea, Jacob knows his selves are far from pretence. And Mackie’s use of doubling in Lucy and Solace, as well as allowing Lucy (as the eventual philosophy lecturer) to voice Jacob’s (and her own) thinking, makes clear that no character is singular or ‘true’.

Significantly, both fictional quests for identity were embarked upon following a school assignment on self, with these ‘Who am I?’ pieces reproduced in both novels as intertextual material. For me, this was purely a device to begin the characterisation of Bea and Stella, and to delineate their starkly different considerations of self. For Mackie it carried far more weight, sending Jacob into the tailspin that precipitated his proliferation.

And dialogism is key to this proliferation for Mackie, as it is to me: ‘If it weren’t for the existence of others, I wouldn’t exist at all,’ Jacob asserts (2014: 155). Lucy expands on this:

The ‘self’, Jacob claims, is an illusion. It’s entirely concocted in a person’s brain. Jacob tells us that we go through life collecting and discarding characteristics that we feel describe what kind of person we are [...] We can only do this, however, by observing and interacting with ‘Others’. Without Others a self cannot exist. (Mackie, 2014: 332)

Just as the resulting novels share philosophy, premise and controlling idea, the process of writing shared a similar purpose for Mackie and me. In one of our intermittent message exchanges, Mackie summed this up:

Identity has been a longstanding interest of mine, fascinated by the ‘who am I?’ question since childhood, in that sense I’ve had many years looking into the identity puzzle, both personal reflection and reading the theory. *In Search of Solace* is a piecing together of my own sense of self – it’s an incredibly personal novel. The written theory and philosophy on the subject I came to much later [...] In short, the novel is my experience of identity. I’m certainly not an academic or expert on the subject. I’m just a human who questions being the human I am, and what makes others the humans they are. (Facebook message from Emily Mackie to Joanna Nadin, Friday 17 October 2014)

I will expand on Mackie’s summation: For me, the process of researching and writing *Queen Bea* (as well as this contextualising thesis) has been a piecing together of my sense of *selves*; it is my experience of *multiple* identity. Thus this novel has helped me work out who I can be, in plural terms. It has

allowed me to accept, even revel in my multiplicity. I hope it will eventually do the same for others.

Appendix 1.

Original submission for *Book of Bad*

Age range

Young adult.

Format

Standalone novel. 40-60,000 words. First person. With “flashback” entries from the “Book of Bad” and locker notes etc.

Concept

Everyone thinks that getting into the right clique is the hardest part of high school. No one ever tells you that getting out again is when it starts to get really dirty.

A timeless tale of the nobody turned somebody, the good girl turned rotten apple, *Book of Bad* is *Heathers* meets *Mean Girls* for the Facebook generation: a book about identity and reinvention; hard-hitting, smart-talking and back-stabbingly brutal.

Synopsis

For as long as Bea can remember, she and Caitlin have been best friends, and, for as long as she can remember, they have been at the bottom of the social ladder at Pennington High, enduring at best, obscurity, and at worst, daily humiliation, all of which they painstakingly record in their “Book of Bad”.

But at the start of Autumn Term in Year 12, a seemingly unconnected trio of events cause a seismic shift, and Bea finds herself becoming the “project” for Pennington’s own Regina George wannabe Nell Sawyer. Piece by piece, Nell dismantles the old Bea, and rebuilds version 2.0. with better hair, a whole new set of friends, and a ready-made Ken to go with the Barbie package.

At first Bea tries to inhabit both worlds – the familiar one of Saturday nights spent on the sofa faking voiceovers for reality TV shows, and the new, glossier one of vodka shots and borrowed bedrooms, where being on TV is a reality itself when your mum is a soap star. But with Nell actively hostile to Caitlin, and Caitlin herself reluctant to come along for the ride, Bea finds herself more immersed in Nell’s world, and more confused about who she is, and who she wants to be than ever. Her only ally is Nell’s older brother Billy – a guitar-playing, poetry-reading emo, whom Nell either ignores, or refers to as “The Gimp”, but who Bea finds intriguing – a reflection of herself, or at least, the Bea she used to be.

Things come to a head at a weekend party Bea is duped into throwing at her parents’ house. Caitlin, having teamed up with the “Untouchables” – the

school outcasts of freaks and geeks – crashes the party to tell Bella that she is going to run against Nell for Anti-Prom Queen. Then, Bea backs out of sleeping with the boy Nell has set her up with. Nell accuses her of being ungrateful, saying she turned her from a nobody into Queen Bea, and she needs to start acting like it. But looking around her, at a house full of sweating, stoned teenagers, most of whom she barely knows, Bea decides enough is enough and “breaks up” with Nell.

But Nell has other ideas. Because, unbeknownst to Bea, she is now in possession of the Book of Bad.

Bea begins the painful process of trying to win back Caitlin, but when a nappy appears taped to Caitlin’s locker door – a reference to her habitual bed-wetting at primary, Caitlin blames Bea, as she is the only person who knows about this, and all their other secrets. Bea realizes what has happened, and realizes the only way to get it back, and get Caitlin back, is to play Nell at her own game. In other words: to find her own weakness, her own dark secret, and threaten to use it against her.

She apologises to Nell, and wangles her way back into her coven, and into the house. Talking to Billy, she finds out that there is a reason Nell treats him, and her friends, as expendable bit parts in her own life, as trash she can kick out when she is done with them: Sadie Sawyer. For years their own mother has treated them at best as trophies to be paraded; at worst, as a dirty secret to be locked away. Mostly though, she has ignored them, preferring to party, and pursue the latest pin-up from whichever set she is on.

And, with the help of Billy, she finds Nell's own "Book of Bad" – a scrapbook of photos of the old her: the her that was clinically, morbidly obese. The her that had to have gastric surgery, and liposuction, and then had to move schools to make sure no-one would ever know.

Having secured her nuclear warhead, Bea sets up a Facebook page "Nellie the Elephant", and prints up mock Prom Queen posters with her pre-op images, ready to stick around school in place of the glossy versions she has stuck over Caitlin's.

But, as Billy points out, the trouble with nuclear weapons is, they only really work as deterrents. Once one side presses the red button, everyone gets hit, and the results are really, really messy i.e. it won't just be Nell who gets hit, they both stand to.

Realising that Billy is right, that by publishing the Facebook page, and sticking up the posters, she would be just as big a bitch as Nell, Bea decides that self-destruction is the only way out, and instead posts an apology for her own and Nell's behaviour over the past weeks, and detailing some of her own past humiliations (whilst leaving out Caitlin's) to make sure Nell can't have the satisfaction of firing a single bullet. She also encourages everyone to vote for Caitlin for Anti-Prom Queen.

But she does have one final shot at Nell; a silent, but effective revenge: She seals a single poster up in a brown envelope, and pushes it under Nell's door, before going home to wait for the fallout.

Obviously, if this was Hollywood, there'd be some kind of mass love-in in the school gym, Caitlin would welcome Bea back with open arms, she and Billy would kiss, and everyone would get to go to the prom. But this is High School, not High School Musical, and things take longer to work out here.

Sure Caitlin gets to be prom queen. And Nell changes school again. And the Book of Bad is posted back to Bea, intact. But Bea and Caitlin's friendship is still fragile, and has to be taken step by tiny step. And of course, when you chop the head off a dragon in fairytales, another tends to grow in its place, and by next term there's a new Queen Bee with new rules and a new dress code.

But the kiss. Well, that was pretty Hollywood.

Sample text

Pennington High

In fourteen hours and twenty-three minutes our so-called lives are OVER. Cat says it might be like St Trinian's. I said we'd be lucky if it was Hogwarts only with bitches not witches. And you can bet your bottom dollar that neither of us turns out to be Hermione.

Bea

It MIGHT be like St Trinian's. You have no faith.

Cat

How can I have faith when I don't own fishnets and my breasts are 30AA?

Bea

Prologue

High school is everything you've read about, everything you've seen on screen in popcorn-confettied cinemas and your so-called best friend's bedroom.

And then some.

It is *Mean Girls* and *Heathers* and *Easy A*. It is *Breakfast Club*. It is *Sixteen Candles*. It is the special edition, 20th anniversary John Hughes box set.

Forget primary. Primary is nothing. Primary is a playground, its pigtail-pulling and name-calling just games, like the worn hopscotch on tarmac, practise for bigger and better things. No, high school is when it really starts. High school is a battlefield in ballet flats, an Edith Wharton world in which conspicuousness passes for distinction, and the wrong shoes can buy you a ticket to seven years of at best obscurity, and at worse, daily humiliation.

And that was the ticket we were on, me and Cat. And we'd kind of got used to it. Used to the snickering behind fingers in the changing rooms; to the laughing in our faces in the gym; to the ritual humiliation of being picked last, or to never being picked at all. Sure we still wrote them down in the Book. But really, how many different ways can you find to complain about gum in your hair or worse in your locker before you accept that things are never going to change. That there's some impenetrable unwritten hierarchy, calculated on a complicated points system based on a combination of wealth and whim, and you are never, never going to get past the bottom rung.

That's what I thought. What we both thought.

Until now.

Because it turns out that that steady drip, drip, drip of stolen shoes, and snickering in the changing rooms that we felt down at the feet of the ladder were just droplets. Now I'm standing on the top, I can see a whole tidal wave heading my way. And the worst thing is, I'm the earthquake that set it off.

Caitlin Brodie

How can I be in the Book of Bad? I'm your best friend. Or did Petra
Deeds finally invite you to her pool party and suddenly you're all
Sherlock and Holmes together?

Cat

*No, duh. But what if you went away? Then what would I do?
I'd just be Sherlock. Or Holmes. Or more likely that woman
who makes the tea.*

Bea

One

I met Cat – Caitlin – on day one of St Saviour’s Primary. She was the one in the odd socks and I had the haircut from hell – the kind you’re pretty sure was done with a pair of kitchen scissors round a soup bowl – and well, we kind of stuck.

We were a double act: like Batman and Robin, Tom and Jerry, Kurt and Courtney. If you wanted one, then you got the other – a real life buy one get one free. Even on the rare, and I mean rare, occasions one of us had a “boyfriend” (by which I mean some new kid who hadn’t sussed yet that kissing either one of us was like the Cheese Touch) me and Cat, we were the real couple, the true love, the forever.

Well, that’s what I thought. Until last summer. Until three unconnected, unremarkable things happened in the space of six weeks:

1. I got breasts.
2. Cat got glandular fever.
3. Ursula Keyes got caught doing the do with Jake Weston and her parents moved her to a dorm at St Gregory’s with a load of other lapsed Catholics and nun wannabes.

Singularly, none of these were Frodo’s ring, but together they were some holy trinity of holy crap; the perfect storm. Like some cheesetastic TV-addicted god up there had watched too many episodes of Buffy or something and figured this was the way to whip up some teen torment.

Because otherwise, how would you explain what happened next? How would you explain why Nell Sawyer – my Joker, my Moriarty, my Regina George made flesh – picked me out that day in the canteen, chose me from the crowd of drama freaks and maths geeks to turn into her own Eliza Doolittle?

And how would you explain why I let her?

Nell Sawyer

How do I hate thee? Let me count the ways...

- 1. Your hair defies definition. Is it actually made of nylon?*
- 2. You think getting into RADA is just a matter of flashing your falsies and your mum's showreel of tarts with hearts.*
- 3. You consider LOL an actual WORD. One that you can just add to the end of every sentence. Like "I'm drinking Slimfast LOL". "I'm a mental deficient bitch from hell. LOL."*
- 4. The time you told Justin Henderson that me and Cat were lesbians and if he paid us a fiver each he could watch.*
- 5. Actually there are so way more than 10 things I hate about you that I might as well stop now and do something more constructive like eat paper, or lick the carpet.*

Bea

And persuading Mr Gupta to have a PROM. And a YEARBOOK.

Cat

Like we're living the American Dream right here in Little Britain.

Bea

Just so she can be Queen AND Girl Most Likely.

Cat

Girl Most Likely to get Botox before she's twenty and end up with her own reality series on MTV, perfume deal and halfwit footballer so retarded he actually makes her look like Einstein.

Bea

Two

So, those breasts. I mean, it wasn't like they were a total surprise, given the number of impossible promises I had traded with mother nature to stump up the goods. But after four years of stuffing socks, and tissues and chicken fillets into an A cup before finally deciding to rock the waif look, being given my very own pair of 32Ds was kind of like asking for a puppy Christmas and coming down in the a.m. to find Digby under tree.

Only now I had them, I didn't know what the hell to do with them. They just kind of took over everything. Suddenly my regulation polo shirt looks like it's taking part in some messed up emo Playboy shoot. So already I'm at a distinct disadvantage before I even get through the gates, because you just know Justin Henderson is going to try to trade me £20 for a peak at those babies. And then Cat goes and gets glandular fever off her cousin Henry who she swears she didn't kiss but he's from Norfolk so anything's possible.

So there I was, sat at the end of the lepers table with a bowl of macaroni, wishing to goddess that some kind of cyclone would descend on Pennington and take pretty much everyone with it, when in came the walking, talking tornado that is Nell Sawyer. Part Barbie, part Basilisk, she acted as if she knew she was designed for a world with better lighting, and she ruled the school with a mix of loud self-confidence and quiet menace.

If she wore purple Prada tights on Tuesday, by Friday half of years seven to twelve, not to mention the faculty, would be dressed in Primark knock-off. She singlehandedly made baby blue eyeshadow this season's

cyanotic must-have, and once wore a fur stole to council. She claimed it was vintage which cancelled out the cruelty but I bet the rabbit doesn't give a shit that it's recycled.

Yet she did all of this with the same studied detachment of a paint by numbers Bond villainess. She kicked through love like it was winter slush, dumping Jesse Scott for Scott Roland and him for some DJ in Roxy's; dismissing the try-hards and no-hopers with the one-line, whip-smart, "Are you on glue?"

But don't think she was just born lucky. Sure, genetics and a drunken night in the Groucho had conspired to give her the body of a porn star, the kudos of a missing daddy and the bank balance of an African diamond state. But believe me, there was design. She knew how to work the system. She knew what was worth knowing, how to get the information, and then how to use it against you.

She was Cruella de Ville, the Snow Queen, the wicked fairy on top of the tree, and me and Cat – we weren't even extras. OK, there were a few people we were ranked above in the Pennington roll of honour:

1. Carmen Castro, aka Fidel, whose monobrow would shame a werewolf.
2. Judy Gilhooly who once threw up in Jamie Corrigan's mouth.
3. Rufus Dexter-Whitely, who has a lisp and a wheelchair.

So when Nell Sawyer, armed a thousand-watt smile and a can of strawberry slimfast scans the canteen and locks her sights on Z-list me, I figured she was

about to mosey over, let loose some bullets at the 32Ds, then go back, guns smoking, to her coven on the A table.

But instead, she asks if she can sit down. Doesn't demand it, doesn't just do it, pushing some expendable year seven out of the way. She asks.

And so what can I do? I say yes.

Appendix 2.**Email interview with David Levithan. 18 September 2015**

JN I know you say you can't remember the exact starting point for *Every Day*, but is the idea of "self" or "identity", and whether we can choose it or change it, something that you've thought about previously and at any length?

DL You can't really write YA without thinking about identity and what forms identity. But certainly I hadn't thought of it in such abstract terms before, at least not in my writing.

JN Was "identity" the driving force behind the novel or more something that grew as the text grew?

DL I think the driving force was thinking about how we are defined by our bodies, and what it would take to transcend that definition. This is certainly one coefficient of identity.

JN There's a lovely moment when A is in Rhiannon's bedroom and notes that she doesn't feel the need to hide the selves she has cast off as she has grown older. Is that something you were particularly conscious of doing yourself as a teen, or have witnessed in others?

DL I'm sure I made an effort to try to change, but I wasn't horribly successful at it, mostly because there wasn't a whole lot that needed changing, as far as my environment was concerned. Certainly I had friends who disowned their pasts as they hit high school – jettisoning "uncool" friends, not

finding any joy in “childish” things. But that wasn’t really my own experience.

JN Taking that idea a step further – do you think it’s possible that we might have concurrent, as opposed to these sequential, selves, and might it be possible to accept them as Rhiannon does, rather than dismiss them as “acting out of character”?

DL This almost becomes a question of semantics – do you have many selves, or do you just have one self that has many facets? Is there a difference between the two? I guess I believe in the latter, since I believe you are always essentially the same person, just doing different things, as opposed to being separate people and personalities within a single body.

JN In *Another Day*, Rhiannon finds herself “disappearing” and becoming Justin’s version of herself. Do you believe it’s possible not to absorb a partner’s or close friend’s view of yourself?

DL It’s all about balance. If you have a strong sense of who you are, that will counterbalance any other people’s sense of who you are. But if you don’t know who you are, then you can be overly influenced by other people’s perceptions of you.

JN In another novel, *Boy Meets Boy*, there are a few lines (describing Infinite Darlene) that hint at the concept of dialogic self: “It’s only after you get to know her better that you realize that somehow she’s managed to encompass all her friends within her own self-image, so that when she’s

acting full of herself, she's actually full of her close friends too." Could you describe how you see self: maybe as an essential thing – the "pearl" view, or as permeable, and a co-creation?

DL Honestly, I'm not familiar enough with the terminology to take a stance here.

JN Following on from that, do you believe in the idea of a "true" self?

DL Not in a definable way, certainly. Everything we do is true – it happened. But not everything we do is necessarily reflective of who we are.

JN "A" is the ultimate gender-fluid, or gender non-specific protagonist, and yet on reading I did keep coming back to seeing "A" as male, despite trying hard not to. I don't think that's to do with language, more possibly me being conscious of you being male (and writing first person), or Rhiannon's heterosexuality. But I wondered: did you truly feel "A" was genderless when writing?

DL I completely thought of A as genderless (and raceless, and bodyless) when writing. Most people, if they feel forced by our language to use a gendered pronoun, default to "he." Yes, my own gender might be an influence. But I think the greater influence is that you meet A within Justin's body. If the first chapter had been about Justine, then you'd think of A as a "she," I believe. (The audiobook for *Every Day* was narrated by a female actor; interestingly, people who hear the book instead of reading it tend to think of A as a female.)

JN “A” manages to remain singular and immutable, despite inhabiting thousands of different bodies and lives, and being close to (albeit for a day) thousands of different people. Given how big an influence our own body and the way others see us if on our self-image, did you see this as problematic at all?

DL I’m not entirely sure what the problematic aspect would be, so I guess I don’t find it problematic. I think if you moved to a different house every week of your life, you would still have a notion of “home.” Similarly, I think A has a notion of self even though the physical form of that self changes.

JN One of the strongest messages *Every Day* gives out is that surface shouldn’t matter, and that it should be the “self” that we love, not the body it’s contained in, whether that’s to do with gender or appearance. Yet as vehemently as you (or “A”) asserts this, it’s clear from Rhiannon’s reaction that this isn’t realistic. It almost feels as if you as a writer are disappointed by this inevitability as it is revealed. Are you? And was it something you already knew when you embarked on the book, or had clarified as you wrote?

DL I didn’t know the ending until three-quarters of the way through the book, and reconciling the love story with the situation was certainly the part that stymied me. If only I’d written a fable – then I could have bent reality to fit the ideal. But reality asserted itself. Was I disappointed? Not once I figured out the ending. (Which, of course, I then undermined with *Another Day*, which will lead to the next book.)

JN “A”’s singularity aside, *Every Day* portrays a wealth of characters who

are attempting to play with or change their identity, whether that's as gender fluid, or transgender, or purely a wardrobe change. Like much of your work, it does this without making this the issue, or labouring the point; they're just part of the cast, and accepted as so. They also often avoid the "crisis" which accompanies identity change. Do you see a shift to this in "real, waking life" and a concurrent shift in fiction? Do we need to go further in fictional terms to portray difference as not-so-different?

DL Especially in terms of gender, there is certainly more fluidity (or, at least, acknowledgment of fluidity) than there's been before. So the book reflects that, rather than creating it. As far as your final question – I think you still have to respect the value of difference, but not define a character (or a person) by any difference. It rankles me when someone says, "This book has a gay character whose gayness doesn't matter!" as if that's some kind of goal. Of course it matters. But it shouldn't define the person.

JN To those detractors who contest multiplicity, or fear it will lead to chaos (there are many), both Gergen and Carter assert that the more multiple our selves, the more empathetic we are to other ways of existence. This seems to be "A"'s message too, as (s)he really does walk a mile in many others' shoes. Was this a deliberate consideration? And if so, should we be more fluid in our thinking about self?

DL Absolutely, the "walk two moons" adage was on my mind as I wrote. But I really was thinking of it mostly in terms of being defined by your body, and that you should not let the exterior define the interior.

Appendix 3.

Final draft of The Movie Kiss (Nadin, 2014g)

The Movie Kiss

By Joanna Nadin

It was a movie kiss.

It was Leonardo di Caprio and Clare Danes in armour and angel wings on the balcony in Romeo and Juliet. It was Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr on a black and white beach from here to eternity. It was Rhett and Scarlet, Holly Golightly and Paul, Jack and Rose.

It was me and him on the front step, on a rainy night in Nowheretown.

But that's what made it perfect.

I'd been kissed before. No less than three times by the age of seventeen. A near low in the history of high school, where success is measured in bases and popularity hangs on your choice of lipgloss.

My kisses were, in no particular order:

- i. Jake Westville. My ill-fated target in spin the bottle at Julie Newbery's twelfth birthday party. I ended up getting sick on chocolate fudge sundae. He ended up getting off with Julie. They're still together. Jake and Julie. I like to think my lack of prowess in the lip department somehow contributed to this alliterative union.

2. Ant McReady. Film buff, Smiths devotee, and year 12's most committed emo. But it turns out his Brokeback Mountain obsession wasn't all about the horses or the sweeping scenery shots.
3. Luke Wright-Watson. Behind McDonald's on the main street. Cheap cider has blocked most of the two minutes twenty-seven seconds of this hell from memory. The rest I strive to do myself on a daily basis.

None of them made the earth move, the world stop, my toes tingle inside my black Chuck Taylors. None of them would make a cheap cable drama, let alone the Oscars.

Olly, my best friend, said I was suffering from film fatigue. That I'd overdosed on John Hughes high school high dramas, and as a result nothing on this side of the silver screen was ever going to come close. That I'd go to my grave never having the perfect kiss if I measured it by Andie and Blane in a stable at a country club. It was like waiting for Godot. He was never going to show up to the ball.

But I liked to think of it more as perfectionism. I mean, who wants to settle for Mr Goodenough when Mr Right is out there somewhere. Besides, Olly's just mad because he's still yet to kiss anyone besides Cat Walmesley in Year 6. We thought he might be gay for a bit. I mean, he totally hearts High Society and knows way too much about the oeuvre of Baz Luhrman. But we borrowed a no label DVD off his Uncles Max and Norman, and nothing moved, let alone the earth.

But, two years later, mine did. Just like I knew it would.

Have you ever wished someone would walk into your life and change everything, just by dint of being alive. That their mere existence would nudge your world off its axis and send everything spinning into a new and brighter orbit.

Well it happened. On September 9th at 12.35pm, Drew Lacey walked into our canteen like Batman and the Joker all packaged up in one neat slick-quiffed, check-shirted, wry-smiling Rockabilly God. His brown eyes met my baby blues as he walked past, his cowboy boots clacking on the Coke-stained concrete, and in that instant I fell in love.

If I could have written the perfect boy, it would have been him. He radiated intrigue and boredom in equal measure, and with a determination bordering on the Olympic. The way he stood outside the chemistry lab, his shoulders leaning against the Dulux orange, bouncing a tennis ball off the wall like he's Newman in the cooler in *The Great Escape*, made my heart ache with want.

Olly said my chances, on a scale of one to The Sure Thing, were nil. Because Charlie Patel saw him kissing Lily Dean on the football pitch and he had his hand up her mini kilt and his tongue so far down her throat it was like he was trying to eat her alive.

I said that it was just a kiss. And not even a pretty one. But Olly said even if it was just a kiss, I'd still have to wait for the Triple As – Amber, Alexa and August – to have their share. Those girls swap boyfriends like they swap

cheap earrings. No one seems to know who's dating who, and maybe it doesn't even matter.

Don't get me wrong, Olly didn't put me at the bottom of the list. I was way ahead of Verity King and Emily Button. I even pipped Hannah Holden who has DDs and a daddy who owns a drug company. But Olly had to say that. That's what best friends do. They hold your hand when you're scared, and hold your hair back when you're sick.

They tell you the truth, but couch it in a little white lie.

But like I said. I'm good at waiting.

So I waited. And I clocked up Drew moments like I was collecting pennies in a jar.

I had seven.

1. That first look in the canteen. The opening credits. The beginning of everything.
2. The time he brushed my shoulder in the crowd at the vending machine. Olly says Stan Havory pushed him and it was an accident. Nothing more. But even though he barely touched me, I felt it in every inch of my body. And that's no accident.
3. The time I opened my locker and a lifetime of kitsch and Johnny Cash CDs fell out. And while Lily and the Triple As stood there laughing like Disney hyenas, Drew knelt down on one knee and handed me a purple-headed troll like it was a Tiffany diamond.

4. The time our lab partners both got the flu and Mrs Pennington said we might as well buddy up than waste sodium nitrate. The significance of “chemistry” was not lost on me.
5. The time in French when Mme Leblanc asked everyone to name a Paris landmark and we said “Jim Morrison’s grave” as one voice, and he jinxed me.
6. The time he stood behind me in the canteen queue and asked me if I was harbouring suicidal thoughts when I picked the macaroni. I said I was the kind of girl who liked to live on the edge. Which would have worked a whole lot better if I hadn’t also had a carton of skimmed and a cookie on my tray. But the line was a good one and he knew it.
7. The time he bust the G on his six-string in the common room one Friday lunch and I gave him a spare from my duffel bag. He’d been playing chart cheese to Lily. A ballad about beauty and the blues. But after he got the string he switched straight to Johnny Cash. My song. Our song.

Seven moments over seven months. Straws, Olly said. And I was clutching at them. But then in the eighth month Aphrodite and Venus and all those other goddesses of love looked down on me. And I went from seven to heaven in one week.

It was a week of fortuity. Of fates colliding and fortune smiling. Serendipity, I said. Only without John Cusack or Kate Beckinsale or the glove counter at Bloomingdales.

On Monday Amber told August who told Alexa who told Drew that Lily had kissed Finn Shakespeare in the back row of the Odeon on Saturday night.

On Tuesday Lily was crying in the upper girls bathroom at first break and it was clear from the conversation I caught from stall two that this was not just a bad time of the month or a broken nail.

On Wednesday Amber's aunt got cooties, aka colon disease, and her parents flew out of town for the weekend to be at her bedside. Amber decided not to go on the grounds she had an algebra exam on Tuesday next, a full drinks cabinet, and an overwhelming urge to have a bunch of randoms chuck up in her downstairs toilet while listening to overloud R'n'B.

On Thursday Charlie Patel, who was August's flavour of the month, invited Olly to the party during AV club and told him he can plus one.

And then on Friday I hit jackpot. I was in the canteen making Sophie's choice between the lasagna and the chicken pie when someone behind me says, 'Just eeny meeny miney mo them. That way you can blame fate instead of yourself when you're praying to the porcelain God by home time.

I don't need to turn round to know it's him. His voice is sand and glue, like Dylan. A low, cool, drawl. And I smell him. Cigarettes and Doublemint and possibility. But I do turn, and I smile. And he smiles right back.

And then it happens. He says, 'So you're going to Amber's, right?'

I say, 'Maybe I am. Maybe I'm not. But I'm surprised you are. Aren't you persona non grata round the mock tudor mansions these days?'

And he laughs. A proper, guileless laugh. 'I think Amber weighed up the odds and decided Lily's comfort and convenience was worth less than a free crate of beer.'

Which isn't generosity on his part. I mean, his Dad owns a chain of off licences. But I get his point. I always get his point. 'She'd never make the maths club,' I deadpan.

'Not with those thighs,' he bats back.

And then I realize we could be playing safe net shots for a while here. So I take a risk. I hit a smash, hard and true. 'So maybe I'll see you there.'

'Not if I see you first.' And he winks. He actually winks. Not a cheesy game show host one, but an "I have seen Stand by Me and know it's in your Top Ten Films of All Time list, even though Keifer Sutherland is in it and he gives you the hives" nudge.

And then it's done. The moment is over. Because a dinner lady in a pink hair net is telling me to hurry up and Charlie has pushed in between us to get the last piece of pie. But it doesn't matter. Because those few words, and seconds were worth a cold plate of pasta. Because I know he knows. I know he gets it. And gets me. And that Saturday night will be the scene I've been waiting for. Saturday night, in a bedroom on Mulholland Drive, will be our first kiss.

But like any great movie kiss, it's all in the set up. And I had scripted it all like a skinny-jeaned Scorsese.

Costume was easy. Emerald green 50s prom dress. Trusty Chuck Taylors. My mother's Chanel No. 5. Dietrich meets Marilyn, with a little bit of Juno thrown in as a nod to the indies. Like me, but better. A 3D technicolour remake of a much-loved black and white classic.

For props I travelled light. Just my smile, and my guitar. Because I don't want to be the girl nodding and swaying while some wannabe Cobain strums out sub Nirvana grunge on a swing chair. I play a mean Folsom Prison Blues and I want Drew to know it.

And dialogue, well, I knew it word for word. I had lines from Bergman and Hitchcock and a whole scene from Zefferelli down pat. Of course this would rely on there being a balcony somewhere, but at Amber's house I figured this was a real possibility.

But like all great movie plans, there's always a hitch. A villain who twirls his moustache at the eleventh hour and sends it all to hell in a handcart.

I just never figured mine would be Olly.

'I can't face it,' he says, when I call round to collect him.

'What?' I ask.

'The whole thing. The shit sound system and the cheap shots.'

'But you have to come,' I say, pulling his jacket off the hook. 'You have a key line. The scene won't work without you. You're the sidekick, the buddy, who gets the best lines and the laughs.'

‘But not the girl,’ he says.

I shrug. And then he loses it. Goes scary crazy in a monologue worthy of de Niro.

‘What if I don’t want to be a bit player in the big movie of your so-called life anymore?’ he spits. ‘Christ, it’s not even a movie. It’s a pathetic little made for TV drama. A soap. You’re not Cathy and he’s not Heathcliff. He’s just another MTV extra who hands it out to anyone with tits and a credit card.’

And just when I think it’s over, he comes back for a grand finale.

‘Oh, and don’t kid yourself. There isn’t going to be a movie kiss. At best you’ll go straight to third base on a pile of coats in the corner.’

Nobody puts me in a corner, I think.

But the door has slammed. He’s gone.

And scene.

And I stand in his doorstep, the rain beginning to fall. And I want to go home. I want to sit on my bed with my graffitied wall behind me like Duckie while Morrissey begs to get what he wants, this time.

But I’m not Duckie. I’m not best supporting. I’m the leading lady. I’m Marilyn and Marlene and Molly. I don’t need him. I just need myself. My guts, my guitar and my cute dress.

In any case, Olly might miss his line, and mess the whole scene.

But in the end, I managed to do that all by myself.

Drew's on the deck with Charlie and Stan. They're jamming to, my oh my, Smells Like Teen Spirit, an appreciation society of preppy and perky wannabe princesses nodding in time like those plastic rear window dogs, not really hearing it. Not getting it.

I don't do the groupie thing. Not my style. I wait until he sees me. Then I turn and walk, real slow, back into the house, on to my set. And I wait.

There's no balcony. Which is a huge oversight given the frankly staggering views over the rooftops. Mr Barrett was missing a trick when he designed this late 20th century monstrosity. But there's a fake Tiffany lamp, and a bed and a poster of Audrey. And I can work with these. I'm a professional after all.

And in the end the set blurs into the background because the camera focus is on my face as I hear the door handle turn, and I dampen the G chord and look up.

It's him. Of course it's him. His hair slick with wax, his mouth pulling into that catlike grin, 'Nice notes, Johnny,' he says, and leans back against the door, clicking it shut behind him.

God, even the way he leans is beautiful. He could say nothing, do nothing but lean and I would be mesmerized.

"You took your time," I say.

"Well I'm worth the wait," he replies.

I falter. Because that's just a tad too confident. He's supposed to be endearingly nervous. Because it's not just going to be a kiss. It's going to be the start of something. Of everything. But I take the material I'm given and I

work with it. I rise, letting the guitar fall onto the duvet, and I walk towards him, my lips parted, waiting to say my next line.

But he's already coming at me, and before I can get the words out his mouth is on mine, and he's pushing me back, towards the bed.

The earth isn't moving.

I stumble, falling on to my guitar, a dischordant minor filling the room.

There are no violins.

His weight pushes me down, as his hand pushes heavy green lace up.

A thousand doves do not fly to the heavens.

And as his fingers reach towards the forbidden, it hits me: John Hughes is not directing this scene. *I* am not even directing this scene.

He is. His raging, hormone-fueled, internet-porn filled, lame frat movie brain is in charge. And I know how this one ends. And it's not going to be with a happy ever after.

I twist my head so that his tongue slides, dog-like, across my cheek.
'Get off me.'

"What the..." he protests.

But I am incredulous. And incredible. Unscripted now, but the lines keep coming. "What did you think this was going to be? You were supposed to be the hero. The James Mason or Jimmy Dean. But you're just another two-bit dimestore hoodlum like the rest."

But my words are wasted. Falling like ripe cherries on concrete.

"What are you on?"

He stares at me. His brown eyes black with fury and broken pride. Not getting me. In any sense. “Lily was right about you. Total freaking nutjob.” He stands, straightening his T-shirt. Making sure his hair and ego are intact.

I say nothing. I have nothing left *to* say. Nothing that fits. Nothing that I could speak aloud without the sobs starting. So I stand, and walk towards the door, in a cloud of Chanel and quiet desperation.

“Where are you going?” he demands.

“Nowhere. Somewhere. Stardust Fucking Avenue.”

Cut to me at the punch bowl downing a plastic Incredibles cupful of courage.

Cut to the Jacuzzi where Drew is half naked with August, a “ten minutes later” caption fading in and out at the bottom of the screen.

Cut to me throwing stones at Olly’s window. A guitar strapped across a ripped and ragged prom dress. Snot mixing with salt tears on my skin.

“Wake up,” I plead. “Olly, you have to wake up. I’m sorry. You were right. I’m a bad person, Olly.”

“You’re not bad.”

The voice comes from the doorway. I turn and see him, the light from the hallway a halo around him, like a Hallmark card angel.

“You’re not asleep?” I sniff.

“Couldn’t,” he shrugs.

I nod. I know. "I'm sorry," I repeat. "It— he—"

"I know," he cuts in. Saving me. Like he always does.

And so I let him. I let him put his arms round me, and hold me, and tell me it's going to be all right. That tonight doesn't matter. That it will happen. The kiss.

I pull back and look at him, into him. "When?" I say.

He smiles. "If this was a movie, you know what would happen, right?"

"No," I lie.

"If you won't say it I will."

My heart beats louder. But steady now. Not the flutter and fear I felt with Drew. But something stronger. I dare him, "So say it."

"Fine," he says, his eyes still on mine. "I would say, 'It's you. It's always been you.' And then—"

"I'd say 'It just took a while to know it.'" I continue.

"And then?"

"And then..." I say, "and then—"

"We'd kiss," he finishes.

I feel my heart skip like the cliché it is. "We would?" I whisper.

But I know it. I know he's right. "We would." I repeat. The question gone.

I move towards him. Then stop, pull back. "Wait," I say. "What if I don't feel anything? What if the world doesn't stop and there are no violins and stuff."

"Then we go back to doing our double act. We are Bonnie and Clyde."

“Tango and Cash,” I add.

“Laurel and Hardy,” he smiles.

But it’s not funny. Because... “What if we do? Feel something, I mean?”

“I don’t know. But that’s what’s so beautiful about the real world. It’s uncharted. There’s no script. No plotline. We just see where it takes us.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

And I know it’s over. The talking. The waiting.

I know that the next scene up is the biggy.

And I close my eyes, and move forward. Until I can feel his breath on my cheek. Until I can feel his lips on mine.

Until the earth moves.

And scene.

(The end)

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